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Schindler's List *My father is a Schindler Jew*

by Les White

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My father is a "Schindler Jew." When I was younger, his nightmares woke me up. He did not talk about his experiences. My mother warned me and my sisters that something terrible had happened to him. We were not to ask about his background nor why we had no grandparents, aunts or uncles. Other children of survivors grew up similarly and in their families, too, the Holocaust was not discussed.

Ten years ago when I was 28, I demanded my father tell me his experiences. They were worse than anything I had imagined. He remembered events and actual dates as if they had just happened yesterday. When he was sixteen, the Nazis marched in. On December third and fourth, his ghetto was liquidated. On May seventh, he was liberated by Russians. His mother and sister were shot, buried in a mass grave. His brother was hanged. Another, nine years old, was gassed. His father was plucked from a naked parade.

Because nature ties fathers and sons, as his son I had tried to model my personality after his. After hearing what he went through, I compared my foundation to walking with a cane, one now kicked out from under me. Though everyone says I look like my mother, my nose, I thought, was his. My father informed me that his nose stayed broken since the middle of the war when an SS officer kicked him in the face.

The movie *SCHINDLER'S LIST* has re-opened discussions of the Holocaust. The movie's accolades and p.r. suggest that only the world's most commercially successful director could have risked tackling this subject, deemed unfilmable, and made it successful. Like Billy Joel's recent pop, muzak-like hit, "We Didn't Start the Fire," which lists historical events in the form of *USA Today* headlines, *SCHINDLER'S LIST* has transcended the entertainment genre to be taught in schools as history. Its director claims, not incorrectly, that the movie provides a "public service." Though my father considers the movie "Hollywood schmaltz," he concedes, "At least the goyim will learn something."

It is what the goyim will *not* learn which frightens me. Though the movie counts Holocaust survivors among its consultants and producers, the filmmakers' technical choices and simple characterizations contribute not so much an

understanding of the Holocaust as cloak its horrors. Spielberg praises the movie's screenplay for "inordinate restraint." I feel like I did at 28, demanding that my father cut the bullshit.

Reviewers and survivors praised the movie's black and white cinematography as aptly symbolic of a dark world, yet it distances events. The film's Holocaust is removed from reality. Yet the Holocaust deserves to be rendered truthfully in all its detail because it challenges and contradicts any advances made by human beings. The way the film limited its color palette diminishes the contrast between the Krakow-Plaszow concentration camp, built of gray wire and concrete on a hilly field of mud, and the medieval splendor of Krakow and the luxury of the concentration camp Commander's villa and the apartment Schindler confiscates. When it rained in Krakow-Plaszow, mud like shit flowed without restraint. The camp's substandard rations often produced maroon urine. Without color, the ash from the crematoriums resembles white, purifying snow and not dirty, non-melting ash.

That the film's ending shifts to color to show life reclaimed ignores a true horror. After liberation, as many of the survivors raced pillaging the nearby town, some unwittingly killed themselves from overeating. For years they had subsisted on rations often no more than an eighth of a small loaf of bread and watered-down soup with a few peas. The movie never shows the camp diet, a rudimentary part of the Nazi extermination plan.

The black and white cinematography is augmented by the filmmakers' use of the "handheld camera" technique to connote "reality." We are to consider the movie documentary-like, as if the camera captured events as they happened or the documentary filmmakers did not have the money for color nor the time to set up level-positioning tripods. Today, television commercials, like those for AT&T and U.S. Sprint, which purport to show real people in real situations use the device of handheld camera shamelessly, as do both highly acclaimed television series, like *NYPD BLUE*, and "reality" shows labeled "tabloid," like *COPS*, *HARD COPY*, *EMERGENCY 911*, and *UNSOLVED MYSTERIES*.

In *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, the shakiness of the handheld camera is also meant to convey the chaos of the Nazi world. What the movie does not convey visually is the Nazi obsession with order, planning, and pageantry. The Nazis carried out a mass extermination of a people with a precision and distribution of labor comparable to a construction team's erecting a building from detailed blueprints. Hitler, who had set out to be a painter, deplored the subjective, "chaotic" quality of modern art, preferring the ancient Greek ideal inherent in that culture's quest for the perfect human form as sculpted by nameless artisans and in large scale Greek architecture emphasizing balance and linear symmetry (the golden mean). The huge Parthenon-like edifices created by Albert Speer for Hitler, the ideal towns the Nazis planned (as faceless as suburban subdivisions), indeed the order of the concentration camps and the assembly-line efficiency of the crematoria represent the subjugation of the individual to the masses. The face the Nazis showed the world — reflected in *Olympiad* and *Triumph of the Will*, official Nazi films publicized as documentaries — was of hundreds of thousands of goose-stepping soldiers and adoring, waving fans, choreographed like a Wagnerian opera beneath huge torches, gold eagles, and swastikas. The Holocaust was as plotted and

executed as the grandiose plans of the four aristocrats in the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, who were heavily fined if they dared veer from the crimes' detailed timetable.

The filmmakers' "inordinate restraint" and their fear of portraying the Holocaust and conditions in the Krakow-Plaszow camp more chillingly lessen the impact of Oskar Schindler's heroics. SCHINDLER'S LIST is reduced to resembling a 1950s Hollywood biblical epic: Schindler as Jesus; Amon Goeth, the concentration camp commander, and the other Nazis as Nero or Pharaoh and the Romans or Egyptians; and the Jews as innocent Christians.

From the start, Schindler is portrayed and soon accepted by the Jews as a Christ figure: more a man on a mission to save Jews rather than a Nazi sympathizer and carpetbagger. The film shows him reviving a shut-down factory and hunting Jews to work for him, rather than the historical situation of him taking over a factory owned by Jews which was doing well. He is shown as having little business sense: only after he has hired Jews is he informed that by having hired Jews over Poles his profit margin will be larger. Wining and dining the Nazis, he constantly barter jewelry for more Jewish workers. He also never gives the Jewish party line. When the Jewish accountant asks Schindler why he risks his neck for Jews, Schindler replies "Trust Me" — wink, wink. The filmmakers did not show Schindler as a man who first wholly embraced the war machine to enrich himself because that would have risked audience identification. In fact, Schindler followed the Nazis into Poland soon after the country was overrun in September, 1939. But he did not open his concentration camp in Czechoslovakia until the end of 1944, which may be an indication that he sensed the changing outcome of the war.

If Schindler is an enigma, if his actions as he evolves from carpetbagger to savior cannot be explained — as many including Spielberg contend — why then does the film give reasons for the Nazis' behavior? The Nazis are portrayed as alcoholics, often partying and orgiastic (all Schindler has to do to gain another concession is present a bottle of wine). Anton Goeth usually kills when drunk. Because his status as antagonist serves to represent the Nazis as a whole, we are led to surmise that the Holocaust can be blamed on alcohol abuse. Perhaps the Holocaust would have never happened had Goeth and company accepted their addiction and gone to AA. (In contrast, Schindler has to goad the Jewish accountant into having a drink.) The movie reflects certain mores in today's United States: a popular acceptance of victimization and an AA philosophy of "powerlessness," with its presumption that alcoholism is one of the main causes of society's ills. The film depicts the Nazi movement as disorderly and confused, not highly organized: e.g., it does not execute genocide with cool efficiency.

SCHINDLER'S LIST ascribes reasons to the Holocaust. Goeth seems to kill only those who are infirm, not willing to follow orders, or sitting down on the job: i.e., the one-armed man, the woman architect whining about faulty construction, the slow hinge maker, and the boy failing to scrub out a stain. These are reprehensible reasons to kill but reasons nonetheless. Even when Goeth takes a practice shot from his balcony, he kills a fat babushka taking a break and sitting down outside a line of hard workers. Yet my father is by accident the only survivor from his family. His mother and sister were shot, his father and youngest brother were gassed, and his other brother was hung *indiscriminately*.

SCHINDLER'S LIST's heavy emphasis on hope in the scenes of Jews in the concentration camps further mitigates the horror. For example, the movie dramatizes a mother and young daughter surviving together. It juxtaposes an orthodox Jewish wedding performed in a camp barracks against a wild party at Goeth's villa attended by whores. Though these scenes may represent events based on fact, in consideration of the Holocaust, such events were so rare that they cannot and should not be accepted as representative. Nothing better demonstrates the filmmakers' lack of conscience than their choice to dramatize the women's being mistakenly rerouted to Auschwitz and not gassed, and the film's not dramatizing what happened to the men en route to Schindler's new camp in Czechoslovakia. That transport was held up at the Gross-Rosen camp. There, in freezing cold, the men were ordered to sit naked, legs spread, one behind the other. The guards whipped them to form a tight chain simulating sodomy. Squeezed in such a way, the men had difficulty breathing; any attempt to shift for more air was met with punishment. For two days, the men were forced to hold this position. The bodies of those who died were not removed.

Because of the influence of the auteur theory (the director as author) on film criticism and Hollywood production, comparisons of SCHINDLER'S LIST to Spielberg's other movies cannot be overlooked. Schindler does come off like a super-human Indiana Jones or the archaeologists in Jurassic Park. The Nazis can be compared to the dinosaurs running loose in JURASSIC PARK or to the shark in JAWS: nature that cannot be wholly controlled, but nature that can be explained as primitive. The Jews—the pitiful Jews showing fear — represent the child in us, like the Indian children rescued by Indiana Jones or the children scared by dinosaurs in JURASSIC PARK.

SCHINDLER'S LIST backs off from showing us starving concentration camp inmates who, if lucky to remain alive had to release their souls from their bodies in order to survive as emotionless robots. To have thought about the surrounding horrors would have killed one's will to live. To have reacted to the horrors would have called undue attention to oneself and more than likely have resulted in being shot on the spot. The audience's horror is mitigated because the faces shown mirror our own fear. How differently we would react if we were watching the concentration camp inmates remain impassive, expecting their treatment. We would be outraged that people can treat other people so senselessly, and we might face the painful truth that all of us have within ourselves the capacity to accept such treatment or be killed or even work in the camps in such a way that we partake in killing our own. SCHINDLER'S LIST puts a face on the Holocaust which makes it more comfortable for the audience. The filmmakers and the author of the original book, in fact, used as one of their main resources a survivor who supervised other Jews and thus received preferential treatment. People did what they could to survive.

Perhaps I owe a debt to Steven Spielberg and SCHINDLER'S LIST. Millions are being introduced to the Holocaust for the first time, especially children drawn by Spielberg's name. My father now speaks to high schools and to movie theater audiences. Newspapers call him for interviews (although *People* magazine rejected him for an upcoming feature). He is to speak before a medical group. However, I fear that SCHINDLER'S LIST will prevent Hollywood from producing more credible and daring films on the Holocaust. Unlike other hit movies which prompt

the production of others with similar themes, SCHINDLER'S LIST is being held up as an ultimate expression. Hollywood has offered its "public service." The movie's p.r. inundates us with information that all the producers connected to the movie thought it would bomb, that Universal put up the money only as a favor to Spielberg. Perhaps SCHINDLER'S LIST is the best Hollywood can do.

I remember calling the National Jewish Theater in Skokie a few years ago and inquiring about submitting a play. After mentioning that two characters were children of survivors, I was told, "Don't bother sending it in." The theater would not stage anything "even hinting of the Holocaust." The assistant's boss confirmed the policy: "Our audience has spoken." Now, because of all the hoopla surrounding the film SCHINDLER'S LIST, rabbis and Jewish leaders in Chicago have encouraged my father to appear in front of audiences after presentations of the film. At first, to make all the screenings at all the theaters, my father was not given time to speak. He was just introduced as a survivor by an m.c. What was an audience to make of that? Recent surveys show the Jews to be the highest earning ethnic minority in the United States, with Holocaust survivors topping the list. If audiences must judge from the film and from appearances, what they see is not a man who lost everything but a well-dressed physician, prosperous and looking well.

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The Crying Game Crossed lines

by Robert M. Payne

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On 17 February 1993, Neil Jordan's *THE CRYING GAME* (1992) crossed a significant boundary. A British-Japanese co-production distributed in the United States by New York's then-independent Miramax Film Corporation, this low-budget (\$5 million) feature became one of the extremely few films with neither Hollywood financing nor a Hollywood distributor to be nominated for the Best Picture Oscar. The fact that Jordan had been unable to secure Hollywood funding for his screenplay (written back in 1983) lent the finished film a somewhat mythological status when it broke through its limited art-house audience to a more popular viewership.

The film also crossed a significant border in terms of content. Released the same year that a coalition of gay and lesbian organizations marched on the Academy Awards to protest Hollywood's homophobia (particularly in regard to *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* and *BASIC INSTINCT*), Jordan's film appeared in a context which rarely treated homoerotic issues respectfully. Judging by the overwhelming number of Hollywood movies which either actively marginalized or vilified questions of sexual ambiguity, it could be taken for granted that the mainstream screen was virtually off limits to any considerate contemplation of such "perversions" as homosexuality and cross-dressing.^[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) For *THE CRYING GAME* to raise these issues, it had to sell itself as a traditional genre picture, a mystery thriller. Then, halfway through, the movie ambushed its audience: after skillfully getting the viewer to empathize with an interracial heterosexual romance, the film — in a highly touted "surprise plot twist" — "turned the tables on audience expectations by revealing the woman in the relationship to be a gay male-to-female transvestite.

THE CRYING GAME's critical and commercial success triumphantly reclaimed the popular screen as a space for constructively questioning, rather than fearfully affirming, assumptions about sexual identity. The fact that the film found such a receptive audience — and six Oscar nominations — suggests that Hollywood's marginalization of homoeroticism isn't so much an honest response to audience demand as an imposition of viewer expectations, a reflection of the industry's frantic play-it-safe financing in the face of spiraling production costs. In this light, the sudden eruption of homosexuality and transvestism in Jordan's film ruptures

both the ideology of Hollywood's "blockbuster" economics and the mainstream's denial of important homoerotic issues to a sexually diverse audience.

So, transvestism in *THE CRYING GAME* can't be reduced to a mere gimmick. The issue's powerful disruption of sexual "certainties" deprives the straight, white, non-cross-dressing, male viewer — such as myself — of a secure and superior identity. Moreover, transvestism's interrogation of sexual ambiguities throws into question other cultural constructs whose ambiguities are all too rarely recognized. But the film's use of transvestism, or cross-dressing,[2] hasn't been adequately examined. In order not to give away the plot twist, movie reviewers never even mentioned cross-dressing, and the film's few critical articles have downplayed the issue's importance.[3] However, a closer look at transvestism's impact on *THE CRYING GAME* can also shed light the film's other crucial concerns: sexuality, nationality, race, and gender.

A(D)DRESSING CRISIS

In her far-reaching study, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber discusses transvestism as an important site of cultural activity. Disturbing the assigned sartorial boundaries between "male" and "female," transvestism exposes the artificiality of the assigned social regimes that clothing signifies. This creates what Garber calls "category crisis":

"By 'category crisis' I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/ white, Jew/ Christian, noble/ bourgeois, master/ servant, master/ slave. The binarism male/ female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between 'this' and 'that,' 'him' and 'me,' is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism, and a transvestite figure...will always function as a sign of overdetermination — a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another.
[4]

Because binary thinking is so fundamental to Western culture, the social anxieties evoked and interrogated by the figure of the transvestite arouse "not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself" (Garher, 17).

What instantly distinguishes *THE CRYING GAME* from so many mainstream movies about cross-dressing — such as *SOME LIKE IT HOT* and *DRESSED TO KILL* — is the film's serious, respectful contemplation of transvestism as a positive catalyst for personal growth.[5] The story concerns Irish Republican Army guerilla Fergus Hennessy (Stephen Rea), who stands guard over a hostage, a black English soldier named Jody (Forest Whitaker). Hiding out near Belfast, Fergus finds himself growing fond of his talkative prisoner. But the hostage plan goes awry when British forces invade the hideout, killing some of the I.R.A. guerillas and accidentally killing Jody. Escaping the British troops, Fergus becomes obsessed with Jody and goes to London to look up the soldier's beautiful lover, Dil (Jaye Davidson).

Passing himself off as a Scotsman named "Jimmy," Fergus ingratiates himself into Dil's affections. However, just as he is about to make love to her, Fergus discovers

to his horror that Dil is a gay man who dresses as a woman. Stunned, Fergus eventually decides that his affection for Dil overwhelms his initial revulsion to "her" lifestyle. He decides to continue an ambiguous relationship with Dil, only to have his ex-lover and I.R.A. compatriot, Jude (Miranda Richardson), suddenly appear and force him into an assassination plot, blackmailing him with Dil's life. Fergus tries to protect Dil by "disguising" her as a man, but Dil ends up tying Fergus to her bed, unwittingly foiling the assassination plot. When Jude arrives at Dil's flat to finish off Fergus, Dil kills her, both in self-defense and as vengeance for Jody. Acknowledging his love for Dil, Fergus voluntarily takes the rap for Jude's death and is sent to prison.

Given Hollywood's traditional squeamishness — if not outright hostility — towards openly homoerotic sexuality, *THE CRYING GAME* would stand as a subversive film simply because Fergus and Dil neither renounce their mutual attraction nor pay for their relationship with their lives. However, Jordan looks upon this homoerotic pairing as something beyond a model for social "tolerance," a powerful mainstream's condescending lenience, which may be withdrawn as easily as it's granted.[6] Instead, *THE CRYING GAME* implicitly asks its viewers to question sexual issues usually taken for granted in cinematic romances.

Jordan sees an "erotic possibility" in the Fergus-Jody relationship, "a sense of mutual need and identification" between the two characters.[7] Where his I.R.A. conspirators see only an alien prisoner, an "animal" whose life is of little value and at their disposal, Fergus sees a fellow human being in Jody. Jody wins Fergus over by calling him "the handsome one," suggesting sexual attraction. The erotic component of their rapport becomes most pronounced when Fergus reluctantly handles Jody's penis so that the hand-bound prisoner can urinate, after which Fergus jokingly says, "The pleasure was all mine." When Fergus begins his relationship with Dil, she initially serves as a "safe" object of transferral for Fergus' erotic fascination with Jody. Because she, like Jody, is both black and English, and because of their romantic association, Dil becomes Jody's stand-in. Even when Dil fellates Fergus (at a time when he still believes that she's a biological woman), his mind is filled by an image of Jody. But once Dil is revealed to be a biological man, Fergus is forced to confront the homoeroticism which infuses his relationships with both Jody and Dil.[8]

In revealing Dil to be biologically male, *THE CRYING GAME* asks its audience not to accept codes of beauty at face value. After all, if Fergus can be sexually attracted to Dil, and if straight viewers can initially empathize with that attraction, then sexual desire can't be reducible to the reproductive urge, as some social authorities might wish us to believe. Moreover, by taking traits like monogamy and dependency — traits usually held in high regard when associated with heterosexual romance — and by applying them to a same-sex relationship, the film estranges these values and allows us to contemplate them with a questioning eye. Instead of being accepted uncritically, monogamy, dependency, and desire may be seen as culturally arbitrary, and the culture that prizes them may not lay claim to any "natural" authority.

Jordan's film powerfully visualizes this challenging concept when Fergus enters the Metro, the dusky pub where he and Dil cemented their relationship, for the first time since discovering that she is a man. Now knowing that the Metro is a gay bar,

Fergus scans the neon-lit room and scrutinizes the patrons, whose gender and sexuality he — and many in the audience — once took for granted. It's presently clear that some of the "women" are men in drag, and the film's visuals stress the artificiality of commoditized "feminine" appearance. This casts the sex of all the bar's patrons in doubt and disrupts the comfort of readily identifying another' gender. But instead of fearing this uncertainty, Fergus confronts it in an effort to renew contact with Dil. Empathizing with Fergus, the viewer makes the journey with him. Rather than viewing the gay bar — the space of the transvestite, the space of the Other — as a prohibitive boundary that must not be transgressed, Fergus enters it and becomes part of it.[9] The bar becomes a channel to the Other side of himself.

Highlighting the arbitrariness of "male" and "female," the figure of Dil ruptures the cultural "certainties" upheld by these terms when they go unquestioned. Dil effectively throws open the perceptual spaces elided by uncritical acceptance of the male/ female binary. Moving beyond the binary's polarities and the comforting expectations of heterosexual romance, the figure of the cross-dresser unexpectedly intimate the latent perceptual realms synthesizing from this cultural rupture. In other words, Dil embodies what Garber calls the "third":

"The 'third' is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis...The 'third' is a mode of articulation a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge." (Garber, 11)

The idea of transvestism indicating a "third" becomes more pronounced, appropriately enough, in the film's third act. To disguise her from the I.R.A., Fergus talks Dil into cutting her hair and wearing Jody's old clothes. However, he won't tell her why he wants to alter her appearance. Assuring her that he doesn't want to make her look like Jody, Fergus only says that he wants "to make [Dil] into something new. That nobody recognizes." Ultimately, the sight of a shorthaired Dil in an ill-fitting cricket uniform isn't an effective disguise, because Dil frustrates Fergus' plans to conceal her from the I.R.A. So, her change in appearance never operates as a narrative device which directly pushes the plot forward. Instead, the disguise functions as a narrative excess, as a surplus of meaning that ruptures the "air-tight" storyline in order to stress Dil's sexual indeterminacy: she still looks like woman or androgyne in men's clothes. Dil's altered appearance is worth comparing to Garber's passage about the convention of removing the wig at the end of a drag show:

"When the wig is doffed, ceremonially, at the end of a transvestite stage performance, what is the 'answer' that is disclosed? Only another question: is this the real one? In what sense real? What is the 'truth' of gender and sexuality that we try, in vain, to see through, when what we are gazing at is a hail of minors?" (Garber, 389)

The interrogation of sex as a socializing construct emphasizes the inadequacy of the male/ female binarism and intimates the latent transformational power that might be released when binary thinking is defied. Neither turning Dil into a "man" nor affirming her "femininity," Dil's short hair and her adoption of male attire visually indicate the emergence of a "third": "something new," something that "nobody recognizes" — not yet.

QUEEN AND COUNTRY

Since "blurred gender indicates a *category crisis elsewhere*" in the narrative (Garber, 17), Dil necessarily becomes an indexical figure for THE CRYING GAME's other cultural anxieties. Just as Dil's cross-dressing questions sexual boundaries, Fergus' adoption of a Scottish identity questions national boundaries. At first, it seems ironic that Fergus, who once identified himself as an Irishman so strongly that he was willing to kill for the I.R.A., can so easily cast aside his Irish identity and pose as a Scotsman named "Jimmy." However, the Scots, a Celtic people like the Irish, got their name from a group of fifth-century Irish settlers. Claiming another Celtic identity, Fergus recalls a time before present-day distinctions were made between the Scottish and Irish peoples.[10] And the fact that Fergus is drawn into this situation by Jody — whose status as a black man makes him an unlikely representative of Britain as a colonial power — troubles national identities even more.

In Europe, national identity is still closely associated with ethnic identity (as the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia tragically remind us). So issues of race and nationality intersect even more acutely in the context of Europe than they do in the United States. The growing racial diversity of Western Europe and the collapse of the old Soviet empire in Eastern Europe have now created new problems of national definition in relation to race and ethnicity. But domestic differences are also complicated by issues of international affiliation. In the case of the United Kingdom (itself an amalgamation of four distinct "countries"), the question of conforming its currency to that of the European Community created such a heated controversy over sovereignty and national identity in 1990 that it caused a legislative rupture: Margaret Thatcher was forced to step down as Prime Minister. Clearly, in the Europe of THE CRYING GAME, old "certainties" of nationhood are constantly threatened, reflecting yet another category crisis.

The conflict in Northern Ireland, a nationality crisis of long standing, spurs the film's narrative. However, Jordan's drama never probes the political complexities of this crisis: Ulster's "troubles" act as little more than a contrivance to draw Fergus and Jody together. Since the I.R.A. are noted for their brutal efficiency and dispatch, the guerillas' clumsy and amateurish capture of Jody begs credibility. Furthermore, it's highly unlikely that a volunteer as old as Fergus, a man in his early forties, would be experiencing sympathy for a hostage so late in life. He would have probably gone through these emotions at a younger age, when he was still a trainee. And even if the viewer accepts Fergus' empathy for Jody as a trait peculiar to his character, it would be just as unlikely for the I.R.A. to entrust a hostage to such a vulnerable individual. Jordan's unconvincing portrayal of the I.R.A. betrays THE CRYING GAME's disinterest in illuminating the politics of Northern Ireland. [11]

Rather, Jordan uses the conflict in Ulster as an all-purpose backdrop for his exploration of nationality crisis. Fergus and the other I.R.A. guerillas are motivated by a certainty of national identity, a certainty which "justifies" Jody's abduction and planned execution. The limits of Fergus' national vision are expressed in this exchange:

JODY: What do you believe in?

FERGUS: That you guys shouldn't be here.

JODY: It's that simple?

FERGUS: Yes.

But of course, it's not that simple — it's just this kind of blind surety that Jody challenges. As Jody talks about the discrimination he faces as a black man, Fergus comes to see beyond their superficial differences. And the friendship Fergus develops with his hostage seems deeper and more rewarding than his relationships with his I.R.A. comrades, who are cold or hostile. Fergus, however, is disturbed by the contradictions Jody represents as both the oppressor and the oppressed.

As Paul Gilroy writes, the British national identity is frequently constructed along a "memory of imperial greatness" which excludes non-white Britons, so

"the limits of the nation coincide with the lines of 'race.'"[12]

On the other hand, Jody's emblematically English traits — his London accent, his fondness for cricket — mark his inclusion within this exclusionary identity, thereby questioning its "limits." The knowledge that the role of Jody is played by a U.S. actor strains these limits further, asking to what extent nationality is a performance. Embodying a multicultural, multiethnic Britain, Jody breaks down the facile equation of nationality with race and ethnicity. And consequently, Fergus' initial conception of Britishness and Irishness as mutually exclusive identities is broken down as well. After all, given the vast cultural and historical influence of the British in Ireland, and of the Irish in Britain, who's to say where one culture ends and the other begins? Jody's very presence disrupts the idea of Ireland — or any country — claiming a national identity by expelling a designated Other.

As he leaves Northern Ireland, and as he develops a love relationship with Dil, Fergus becomes willing to travel beyond his limited visions of nation and self. And when Fergus becomes an object of ethnic derision in London, he finds himself in circumstances not incomparable to Jody's in Ulster. Fergus moves from wanting to expel Jody to internalizing him, from wanting to expel the other to acknowledging the Other as a part of himself.

Interrogating the concept of the country as self-contained and exclusionary, *THE CRYING GAME* questions the very ideas of nationalism and "foreignness." Focusing its narrative around those marginalized by the dominant ideology — in this case, white, heterosexual, Anglocentric Britain — Jordan's film stresses the relationality not only of sexual identity, but also of national and ethnic identities and how they are shaped by cultural forces outside the mainstream. The camerawork visually suggests its concern with the margins by occasionally shooting the dialogue between Fergus and Jody with the characters at the edges of the widescreen frame, facing away from the center of the image (a visual tactic used to best effect by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet in 1965's *NOT RECONCILED*). Placing these characters — literally — in the margins (of the frame), *THE CRYING GAME* takes the emphasis away from the accustomed center of visual narrativity and frustrates the shot/ counter-shot's "suturing" power of diegetic closure.

Guiding the viewer's attention to both the political liminality within the story and the formal liminality within the image, *THE CRYING GAME* intriguingly imagines

a discourse close in spirit to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. Robert Stain draws upon Bakhtin to articulate the notion of "ethnic dialogism":

"Ethnicity is relational, an inscription of communicative processes within history, between subjects existing in relations of power." [13]

Dramatizing the exchange of subcultures within a context of power — Britain's external colonization of Fergus and its internal colonization of Jody — THE CRYING GAME also moves beyond the liberal conception of nationality as the gradual inclusion of subgroups within the dominant society. Instead, the film imagines a dialogic space within the margins, a site of reciprocity and commonality constantly interacting with and interrogating the dominant. Who dominates in this scene, the white Irish captor or the black English hostage? In the act of dialogue, the distinctions between the dominant and the marginal, the inside and the outside, are no longer so easy to draw.

DRAG/ RACE

In this dialogic context, it's surprising that the film doesn't overtly stress the interracial issues raised by Dil and Jody and by London's multiethnic atmosphere. Jody refers to Northern Ireland as "the only place in the world where they call you nigger to your face," and he speaks with pride of cricket as "the black man's game." Later, Jude describes Dil as "the wee black chick," but beyond these minor verbal acknowledgements race remains an unspoken, problematic presence.

For example, why would the I.R.A., citizens of (as Jody says) such a racist country, believe that a black soldier's life would be valuable enough for the British authorities to ransom? Why wouldn't they have kidnapped a white Briton instead? How has Irish racism left its mark on Fergus' racial attitudes? What racial prejudices does he have to overcome to court Dil? And why doesn't Dil have any significant black companions besides the absent figure of Jody? The film elides these questions.

THE CRYING GAME chooses not to probe the anxieties aroused by interrogating racial identity. The cultural and national uncertainties evoked by racial issues — blacks as an integral part of the European population, black transformation of European culture, interracial couplings — are, instead, displaced onto the uncertainty of Dil's gender.

The representation of black drag in dominant white society arises from the contradictory image of the black male

"as both sexually threatening *and* feminized, as both super-potent and impotent" (Garber, 271).

So, the image of a black man in women's clothing implicitly expresses parallels of political disenfranchisement, a conflation of race and sex that may suggest a kind of solidarity between black people and women in general, but which also elides their historical and experiential specificities. Serving as a vehicle for the entry of a marginalized people into the mainstream (though not necessarily on a level of equality), the transvestite may be seen "as the figure of crossover itself" (Garber, 271). In this light, the viewer can read Dil, through her relationship with Fergus, as

a figure both of black solidarity with the Irish and of insinuation into the white British mainstream, which is also a reflection of Fergus' political ambiguity.

More important, Dil's crossover status as a black — or given the lightness of her complexion, a biracial — transvestite intimates the constructed character of not only gender, but also race. As Gilroy puts it:

"Accepting that skin 'colour', however meaningless we know it to be, has a strictly limited material basis in biology, opens up the possibility of engaging with theories of signification which can highlight the elasticity and emptiness of 'racial' signifiers as well as the ideological work which has to be done in order to turn them into signifiers in the first place. This perspective underscores the definition of 'race' as an open political category, for it is struggle that determines which definition of 'race' will prevail and the conditions under which they [sic] will endure or whither away." [14]

The intersections of race, nationality, and sexuality are what make the film so compelling. However, collapsing these complicated areas of inquiry into realms of faulty binary thinking also risks reducing them to arbitrary and interchangeable categories lacking any historical specificity. Acknowledging the arbitrary character of national and racial identities is important, but this can't undo the very real and continuing history of Ireland's colonization by Britain or of Britain's discrimination against its own non-Anglo-Saxon populations. So, it may be said that the film trivializes the issues it raises as much as it illuminates them. [15]

Indeed, there's something disturbingly simplistic about the film upholding Fergus' fixation on Dil as the avenue for overcoming such deeply entrenched divisions. Since we never learn what drove him to join the I.R.A. in the first place, we're not sure what conscious political impulses Fergus is acting on when he seeks a relationship with Dil. Therefore, when he gives up his radicalism and begins an anonymous London, working for the very society he fought against, the choice between active political engagement and political conformity is made to appear equally arbitrary — even though Fergus' I.R.A. past highlights the subversively political character of his relationship with Dil. Also, in minimizing a black/ gay/ cross-dressing context for Dil, the film elides many political issues specific to these communities. For example, the issue of A.I.D.S. goes unconvincingly unmentioned throughout the film (ruptured, perhaps, when Dil abruptly announces late into the third act that she has a "blood condition").

Moreover, *THE CRYING GAME* evokes the colonialist model of pairing a white man with a non-white (Third World) "woman." The film accomplishes the extraordinary task of getting mainstream audiences to root for a homoerotic relationship, but only by convincingly disguising the partner of color so that the audience can still view the pairing as an unequal male-female relationship. [16] The construction of interracial romance as an affirmation of white, male primacy once again collapses race and gender into a culturally arbitrary model of dominance and submissiveness. So, *THE CRYING GAME* arguably makes Dil "exotic," rendering the troubling political issues she poses less threatening to a straight, white audience. Or in the words of bell hooks:

"Straight white men want a mammy so bad, they will vomit up their

homophobia if need be."[17]

Still, viewing Jordan's film only in this light overlooks its richness. In a strategy comparable to Garber's "third," Jordan examines racial power relationships beyond traditional representations of masculinity and femininity. Though arguably an "effeminate" black man, Dil still exercises power over Fergus by being the locus of his obsessive affections and, more obviously, by tying him up in her bed during the film's climax, Dil also assumes a place of power when she shoots and kills Jude (but more on that later). Most significantly, the momentous revelation of Dil's biological gender powerfully disrupts the colonial model of the white-male/ non-white-female pairing. The discovery of Dil's biological gender graphically and unexpectedly returns white, male erotic fascination with the Third World back to the penis, back to its own phallocentric source of masculine self-obsession. Dil's unveiling literalizes the feminization of the Third World in Western representation as a patriarchal construct of self-flattery that hides the — competitive, threatening, but also potentially connective — maleness of the non-white world.[18] Insofar as she disrupts erotic expectations, Dil doesn't affirm the colonial model, but on the contrary, she betrays its racist, sexist cultural limits and, in doing so, tacitly suggests that Western representation move beyond them.

WOMEN ARE A DRAG

However, despite its insightful probing of power relations, *THE CRYING GAME* still fails to cross another divide, the one between men and women as unequal social subjects. With the revelation of Dil's biological maleness, Jude stands as film's only significant biologically female character. She also emerges as the film's primary antagonist, because she facilitates both the capture of Jody in the first act and the blackmailing of Fergus in the third. In both cases, Jude (Judas?) becomes a very disagreeable character, since her presence frustrates the utopian implications of not only her own coupling with Jody, but also Fergus' with Dil. Consequently, Jude's death (at Dil's hands) provides the film's "satisfying" climax, but it also leaves disturbing questions about the film's attitude towards biological women. *THE CRYING GAME* begins the vilification of Jude early on. After he's kidnapped, Jody singles out Jude as the "bitch" and "whore" who set him up (he spares the men similar criticism). During Jody's captivity, Jude is the only one to strike him, cruelly pistol-whipping him while he's blinded by a canvas hood. After the blow, Jody remarks to Fergus:

"Women are trouble, you know that, Fergus? Some kinds of women are...Dil wasn't trouble. No trouble at all."

And of course, the woman Jody upholds as his ideal is also a biological man. Fergus' subsequent relationship with Dil and his rejection of Jude as a romantic partner appear to support Jody's pronouncement.

Jude may be seen as a kind of double for Dil. When the audience first sees her in the film's first act, Jude wears a revealing mini-skirt, her long blonde hair in a soft, wind-blown cut. But when she reappears in the third act, her dress is a drab and suit-like, while her hair has been dyed black and given a shorter Prince Valiant cut that emphasizes the hard angles of her face. Jude calls this her "tougher look," a new guise apparently intended to help her elude the British authorities. Jude's drastic change in appearance, like Dil's, stresses the conventions of clothing as

highly versatile, unfixed, arbitrary. More importantly, Jude's "tougher look" recalls the *femme fatale* of 1940s *film noir* (perhaps epitomized by the stern-faced, broad-shouldered Joan Crawford), whose "mannish" appearance frequently signaled a presumption of "masculine" power that aroused anxieties in many male characters (and viewers), anxieties traceable to the political empowerment of women on the homefront as men were called away overseas during World War II. So, Jude's intermediary crossdressing also evokes the category crisis of male/female.[19]

Jude and Dil, then, may be seen as two different kinds of "phallic women." Dil is the woman with a phallus (or more exactly, with a penis, the referent of phallic power), while Jude is a woman who aspires to the power connoted by the phallus, and whose "tougher look" affirms power to be constructed as "masculine." By having Dil shoot Jude (in a scene that sometimes provokes rousing cheers from the audience), the film implies that one kind of phallic woman is preferable to the other, that men may aspire to the "feminine," but women must be punished for aspiring to the "masculine." As the short-haired, gun-wielding Dil pumps bullets, one by one, into Jude's body, she questions her human target: "You used those tits and arse to get [Jody], didn't you?" Jude is reduced to writhing on the floor in front of Dil and her gun, crying out for help: "Get that thing off me, Fergus." The phallic Jude dies pleading for her own castration.

Indeed, Dil's transvestism and her dependent, needy personality (hooks's "mammy") emerge as safe, male-reliant substitutes for the not-always-calculable presence of the self-assured, discontented woman. To the extent that it disempowers women, "femininity" may be regarded as a specifically patriarchal construct, as an aesthetic that reassures male physical and political might. Since women must learn how to be "feminine" from male desires and male-controlled media, it's no surprise that biological men may become experts in embodying the "ideal woman." Although transvestism may create a space for utopian connectedness between men and women, and perhaps imagine a discourse beyond patriarchy in the process, cross-dressing may also be used to uphold the political inequality between men and women. Rather than negating masculinity, male-to-female transvestism may be said to prove that a man is still male "against the most extraordinary odds" (Gather, 96).

On the other hand, since patriarchy defines maleness as the norm, a woman who dresses as a man is only aspiring to be "normal," but aspiring to an unattainable phallic power she will always lack. Therefore, the disparate receptions of the male cross-dresser and the female cross-dresser seldom create a space of equality:

"This is a critique frequently made of contemporary male transvestite theater, that it occludes or erases women, implying that a man may be (or rather, make) a more successful 'woman' than a woman can... [C]rossed-dressed men are emblematic of cultural crisis (or even of the 'human condition'), but the cross-dressed woman is a risible or in the case of *THE CRYING GAME*, an expendable] sign of failed 'femininity.'" (Garber, 249)

So, as it stands, the film, while upholding a multicultural world of transgressed boundaries among biological men, appears to argue for the eradication of biological "tits and arse." However, like the veiled phallus, whose signified power is always elsewhere, Jude's power is also somewhere else. She emerges as the *de facto*

representative of degraded anti-colonial struggle — she ultimately exemplifies the misdirected power of the I.R.A., eliding the organization's male-dominated past. In other words, the I.R.A.'s complex history of violence is displaced onto a negative, misleading archetype, the *femme fatale*. This displacement suggests THE CRYING GAME's greatest cultural anxiety, the one it can't traverse: the growing political empowerment of women.

THE WRAP-UP

The failure to more positively include biological women, however, doesn't negate THE CRYING GAME's constructive interrogation of sexuality and other cultural anxieties. At the film's conclusion, when Fergus is separated from Dil by prison Plexiglass and a long sentence, the nascent utopia latent in their relationship remains suspended, hopefully poised to appear, but for the moment, unrealized. While Jordan's film can't envision the total transformation of a divided society — the complete coming-together of Fergus and Dil, the transcendence of patriarchy — it can still imagine a microscopic true first step: the transformation of an individual through the homoerotic transgression of social barriers. With its respectful portrayal of the Fergus-Dil relationship, THE CRYING GAME suggests that the social changes worked upon the dominant culture by marginalized cultures resonate profoundly on the most intimate levels.

Multiculturalism, a concept once artistically and academically viewed as positive and progressive, has recently been criticized from both the right and the left. This criticism frequently reduces multiculturalism to either a fractious "identity politics" or the ineffectual division of institutional spoils between sharply defined racial groups.[20] The concept is seldom viewed dialogically, as intercultural interplay with the possibility of profoundly affecting everyone involved in the exchange, including the dominant society. But THE CRYING GAME hints at the connective possibilities of cultural heterogeneity. As the film stresses the arbitrary character of rigid cultural division, it illuminates culture as relational, interactive, and always changing. The constant transformation orally given culture by its neighboring cultures thereby discourages clinging to cultural identity as a vehicle for separatism or supremacism.[21]

Viewing ourselves as cultural, and therefore relational, we may question the ideology of the "natural" as equally cultural, as a society's attempt to reify itself. So, it's ironic that THE CRYING GAME, a film that deeply questions the viewer's conceptions of human "nature," should frame its story with a fable about a frog and a scorpion, a fable with the maxim that everything "does what's in its nature." The audience first hears this fable when the imprisoned Jody is trying to persuade Fergus to remove the canvas hood from his head. The tale is repeated at the end of the film as Fergus, now a prisoner himself, explains to Dil why he's serving time for her. The words, "I can't help it. It's in my nature," are the last to be spoken before the credits roll. In another context, these words might have served to uphold a dominant social structure, one that views its ideology as the logical outcome of immutable "natural" forces. But in the context of Jordan's film, with its disruptions of sexual attraction and gender identification, "nature" takes on a different connotation, a meaning closer to Garber's "third": a human impulse that may rupture the binary barriers of cultural conditioning.

When it ruptures ideological definitions of "nature," eroticism serves as a

perceptual channel towards a greater human connectedness. Like Fergus' relationship with Dil, the ideal manifestation of this connectedness has yet to be realized, yet to transcend completely the structures of separation. However, leaving the characters' relationship poised on the brink of possibilities, the openness of Jordan's ending invites imagining the commensurate possibilities of the erotic beyond present-day cultural "boundaries."

Like the best of gay art-house cinema (exemplified by filmmakers like Pasolini, Fassbinder, Almodóvar, Jarman, and Frears and Kureishi), *THE CRYING GAME* intimates a polymorphous eroticism that embraces the deepest commonalities among all humans as fellow living creatures. Jordan similarly suggests a new erotic relationship to others (and Others), an interpersonal bond to break down the constructs of identity that uphold difference as inequality. The film, then, carries the seeds to subvert its own misogyny.

When such connective possibilities are frustrated in *THE CRYING GAME*, the society of division and demarcation makes itself felt. This frustration is marked by the dialogue's almost incessant use of the word "luck." The utopian potential of erotic connection is degraded and displaced onto a hostile, divisive epithet.

But homocroticism as a perceptual channel need not express itself in the physical act of sex. Just because it can be a means of self-discovery within the social, the homoerotic doesn't necessarily become a practiced end. After all, once Fergus discovers Dil's biological gender, he doesn't have sex with her. For the straight viewer, heterosexual acknowledgement — rather than the condescending allowance — of the homoerotic as part of the human fabric requires unraveling the socially unequal cultural segregation between sexualities, imagining a heterosexuality beyond heterosexism. *THE CRYING GAME*'s inability to envision a complete coming together of Fergus and Dil also reflects the limits of the film's heterosexual authorship. (And this article's defense of those limits partly reflects my own hard-dying homophobia.)

THE CRYING GAME's commercial success affirms the importance of examining the sometimes disturbing social resonance of the erotic. If the revelation of Dil's maleness hadn't been positively received by most of the audience, the film wouldn't have generated positive word-of-mouth and wouldn't have been financially rewarded. Just as Dil, through her transvestism, may be seen to cross over from the marginality of a black, gay community to the mainstream of straight, white culture, so Jordan's film may be seen to cross over from the art house to the Academy, from a marginal cinema to Hollywood. *THE CRYING GAME*'s self-contradictory standing — as a work that both criticizes and affirms the dominant culture, as a production that both shocks and soothes the general audience, as both an art-house film and a Best Picture nominee — reminds us that the space between the "mainstream" and the "margins" remains a site of contest and negotiation, a terrain of crossed boundaries, constant interplay, and endless possibilities.

NOTES

Thanks to Grigoris Daskalogrigorakis and Áine O'Healy for their input and feedback.

For more on the issues surrounding the gay and lesbian Oscar protest, see Robin

Podolsky, "How Do We Look? Some Queer Ideas About the Politics of Representation," *L.A. Weekly*, 19 June 1992, pp. 14-2. To some, the term "transvestism" is objectionable because it connotes negative judgment, so they prefer the more value-neutral "cross-dressing" instead. However, in the interest of a varied vocabulary, I'll be using the word "transvestism" — non-judgmentally, I hope — simply as a synonym for "cross-dressing." For more on terminology, see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. vii.

3. For example, even though she acknowledges that "gender is a performance," Frann Michel writes: "To describe Dil as a transvestite, crossdresser, or drag queen is implicitly to describe her as 'really' a man..." See "Racial and Sexual Politics in THE CRYING GAME," *Cineaste*, 20, No. 1(1993), p. 32.

4. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 16. All further quotations from this book will be referenced in the text. All italics in the quotations are from the original.

5. Outside the Hollywood mainstream, one can find more considerate portrayals of transvestism, films such as Edward D. Wood Jr.'s GLEN OR GLENDA? (1953), Toshio Matsumoto's FUNERAL PARADE OF ROSES (1969), Jennie Livingston's PARIS IS BURNING (1991), and John Waters' work with Divine. For all examination of transvestism's compromised representation in Sydney Pollack's TOOTSIE (1982), see Deborah H. Holdstein, "TOOTSIE: Mixed Messages," *Jump Cut*, no. 28 (1983), pp. 1, 32.

6. For more on "tolerance" in a gay cinematic context, see Robin Wood, "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic," in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 652.

7. Neil Jordan, "Introduction to THE CRYING GAME," in his *A Neil Jordan Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. xii.

8. Because Dil identifies herself as a woman, I shall refer to the character as female. And while I understand that the terms "biological man" and "biological woman" are objectionable to some cross-dressers, the phrases are currently the most helpful to distinguish gender as a biological occurrence from gender as a social identity. So, a character like Dil can be described as a biological man who chooses to be identified as a woman.

9. This scene stands in marked contrast to one from the Hollywood movie RISKY BUSINESS (1983), which Garber discusses (p. 299). In that film, the fleeting figure of a black male-to-female transvestite is quickly used to suggest an area beyond the limits of the youthful protagonist's formative sexuality, limits he never transgresses.

10. This, of course, is a very complex issue, since many Protestants in Northern Ireland are of Scottish ancestry,

11. I owe these observations to Áine O'Healy,

12. Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of*

Race and Nation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 60-69.

13. Robert Stam, "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester J. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 259.

4. Gilroy, pp. 38-39.

15. Cf. Jonathan Romney, "THE CRYING GAME" (review), *Sight and Sound*, 2, No. 7 (November 1992), p. 40.

16. Referring to Jaye Davidson, the male actor who plays the role of Dil, producer Stephen Woolley remarked that many viewers "still insist that Jaye is a girl." Richard Corliss, "Don't Read This Story!" *Time*, 1 March 1993, p. 57.

17. bell hooks interviewed by Ernest Hardy, "Whitewashing Black Beauty," *L.A. Village View*, 22 October 1993, p. 37.

18. On this issue, Jordan's film is worth comparing to David Henry Hwang's compelling 1988 play *M. Butterfly* — now a disastrous David Cronenberg film — which is another disruption of the colonial romantic model by transvestism. Garber's book includes an extended analysis of this play (pp. 235-251).

19. It would be intriguing to apply some of Garber's observations about sartorial codes to the figure of the *femme fatale* in 1940s *film noir*. Unfortunately, space doesn't allow for further discussion. Garber briefly touches on the 1940s image of Joan Crawford (p. 157), but mainly as a co-opting image of "virility" for straight women.

20. For example, see such diverse negative assessments of multiculturalism as Paul Gray, "Whose America?" *Time*, 8 July 1991, pp. 12 ff; and a special issue of the *L.A. Weekly* titled "Multiculturalism: The New Racism?" 5 June 1992.

21. For more on the heterogeneity of culture, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

The Crying Game Gender, genre and "postfeminism"

by Aspasia Kotsopoulos and Josephine Mills

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At first, THE CRYING GAME (Neil Jordan, 1992) seemed like a startling breakthrough in mainstream cinema. According to all the early reports that we heard from our friends, here at last was a film that proved that compulsory heterosexuality could be challenged and yet the film could appeal to a wide audience. Everyone to whom we initially talked lauded the progressive quality of this film. So we faced a shock, not in Dil's unveiling, but in discovering a plethora of plot devices and characters at odds with the freshness of seeing a transvestite at the center of a popular film.

For a start, why did no one mention the horrendous representation of the lone woman in this film, Jude (Miranda Richardson), as a chameleon bitch murdered for her treacherous femininity? Everyone talked about the relationship between Dil (Jaye Davidson) and Fergus (Stephen Rea), but why didn't anyone mention Fergus and Jody (Forest Whitaker)? We proceeded to do research, and read about fifty articles and reviews from Canada and the United States. Surprising to us, many reviewers described the film as a "comedy" and referred to the central relationship as "perverse,"[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) while simultaneously claiming that the film dealt with difficult political issues.[2] None of the descriptions coming from either the progressive community or from the mainstream press fit the film we saw. To us, THE CRYING GAME espoused a reactionary position with respect to women, blacks and queers, and displaced concrete political concerns onto a transhistorical notion of human nature. We set out to explore our reading of THE CRYING GAME considering its misogyny as a starting point.

Particularly useful in our exploration of the role of women in THE CRYING GAME is a historical consideration of film noir. While THE CRYING GAME is not an example of film noir, it borrows some clearly — and perhaps some not so clearly — recognizable conventions from that genre. This includes the codification of Jude as a film noir spider woman in a costume that suggests the 1940s, the period out of which film noir emerges. Most of all, THE CRYING GAME's similarities to film noir occur at the level of theme or ideological project and not style.

Film noir's ideological project is to alleviate male confusion over women's roles or sexual identity through the restoration of Woman to patriarchy. Film noir develops

in the mid-40s as a response to women's new found, wartime independence and constitutes a backlash. Frank Krutnick (1991) asserts that a large number of noir films are concerned with the woman who seeks self-definition outside family and home, and are symptomatic of that period's "male sexual paranoia." Simply put, the independent woman is perceived in these films as an assault on masculine identity (61-3). Film noir's meta-discourse on women and its emergence during a period of patriarchal retrenchment has a relation to film noir revivals of the early 70s and early 80s, periods which experienced a recurring cycle of anti-feminist backlash. It is within this context that we wish to consider women and "postfeminism" in *THE CRYING GAME*.

Reviews of the film either do not mention the character of Jude or refer in passing to her as the "alluring blonde" used by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to trap a "black British soldier."^[3] Yet she has an important narrative function. She provides an all-too-easy means of closure to a narrative that would otherwise surely spill out, given the socio-political context of Britain and Northern Ireland. To speak of *THE CRYING GAME* as progressive means to ignore the portrayal and treatment of Jude, the only "woman" in the film.

We put "woman" in quotation marks because Jude very clearly represents a type: the spider woman or femme fatale of film noir who tempts men with her sexuality and destroys them when they cannot resist her. The spider woman is not inherently evil, but rather her attractiveness and unknowability make her dangerous. She must be recuperated by either her annihilation or her final restoration as good object within the patriarchal order. Moreover, in such films women are defined by their sexuality.^[4] Significantly, the femme fatale's sexual power tends to be overvalued by the male characters (Krutnick 64). Male fears of the economically independent career woman become displaced onto the threat of a destructive female sexuality.

The noir-influenced thriller *THE CRYING GAME* almost immediately marks Jude as possessing a dangerous, ominous sexual power as she uses her feminine wiles to ensnare Jody in an IRA kidnapping. Jody begs his captors to not leave him alone with Jude because, he insists, "She's dangerous." Curiously, Jody never blames Peter (Adrian Dunbar), the IRA leader of the operation, even though Peter is more inclined to mentally abuse the captive. Later, when Jody describes his romantic relationship with Dil to Fergus, the Irishman asks why Jody was "fucking around" on her with Jude if he was so in love. "That bitch!" exclaims Jody, implying that it was impossible for him to resist Jude's feminine power. She is dangerous in his eyes because she is a woman and because she is sexually attractive.

The film never expresses that Jude is politically active — doing her job, so to speak, because she believes in the goals of the IRA. Only briefly when she talks about her role in the kidnapping, she says, "Someone had to do it." Like her predecessor, Mildred Pierce, Jude dares to seek an identity outside the traditional confines of home and family — but in a career of terrorism rather than restaurantship. Still, she can be read as a New Woman, independent and driven, and in her last incarnation, a "power-dressed businesswoman"^[5] who happens to be in the business of assassinating British judges. Despite establishing her as a character who works for the IRA, the film resolutely displaces Jude's political motives onto her treacherous female sexuality.

A consideration of the Jewish heroine Judith of Bethulia, from whom Jude's name derives, reveals that THE CRYING GAME places Jude in the same impossible, unenviable position as her namesake.[6] It is illuminating to consider briefly the parallels between the two women and their stories. Judith, the story goes, saved the Jewish people by using her feminine wiles to cross enemy Assyrian lines. She then seduced the Assyrian commander Holofernes and beheaded him while he was drunk. Interestingly, Renaissance depictions of this event suggest that the story of Judith and Holofernes came to be perceived as "an allegory of man's misfortunes at the hands of a scheming woman" (Hall 1974:181). This is despite the fact that Judith is considered a freedom-fighter by Jews. Jude receives the same treatment in THE CRYING GAME: all we need to know as viewers is that Jude is bad. And if we don't see that at the beginning, then the over-coding of Jude's body by the end ensures that we do.

Jude's physical appearance undergoes three transformations in the course of the narrative. When we first encounter her, she is a blonde working-class woman in tight mini-skirt, sexually enticing a black soldier in civvies at an amusement park. The second time we see her she is in an oversized fisherman's sweater with clean-scrubbed face, obediently serving tea and sandwiches to the male IRA members at their hideout. The third time we come across her is in London. Here, she is a virtual cardboard cutout of the film noir, femme fatale with dark, severe-looking hair, red lips, and a 1940s Joan Crawford-esque suit, complete with pumps and leather gloves to match. What was only articulated earlier through Jody's words is now made visible. Jude's hair and costuming code her as dangerous and threatening, a phallic woman who must be destroyed. She comments to Fergus at their reunion that she needed a "tougher look." Ironically, she does not understand that her new look renders her a scapegoat for the narrative's loose ends, which must be tied up to effect closure, specifically, to provide a sense that justice has been done.

Typically in film noir and elsewhere, notions of duplicity center around the feminine. Kaja Silverman (1986) argued that women's ability to change their appearance more drastically and frequently than men because of greater fashion options has historically rendered femininity an unstable signifier:

"The endless transformations within female clothing construct female sexuality and subjectivity in ways that are at least potentially disruptive, both of gender and of the symbolic order, which is predicated upon continuity and coherence" (148).

Male dress on the other hand, Silverman says,

"[freezes] the male body into phallic rigidity...a rock against which the waves of female fashion crash in vain" (148).

Although it may undergo minor variations, the suit and tie, explains Silverman, has been a constant since it became the uniform of the Western bourgeois male in the eighteenth century. Male costuming has come to signify the constancy and stability of male sexual identity and authority, placing masculinity firmly in line with the symbolic order.

Jude's frequent transformations in appearance make her identity unknowable to

the men in the film and to us. Because she is chameleon-like, she cannot be trusted and proves disloyal and unreliable with men. Moreover, her presence is disruptive. When she appears in London as the vengeful spider woman she throws everything into disorder, in particular the newly reconciled relationship of Fergus (who is in London under the alias of Jimmy) and Dil.

At this point, Jude introduces an oppressive tone of danger, betrayal, jealousy and viciousness into the narrative (consider, for example, the catty exchanges between her and Dil). She insinuates herself into the lives of Fergus and Dil, and inescapably and inexplicably materializes everywhere they go: at the hair salon where Dil works, at a South Asian restaurant where the couple are dining, and at the bar where Fergus and Dil hang out. Her omnipresence increases her threat.

While film noir demonstrates that the spider woman's power is terrifying, it simultaneously gives sanction to the narrative to proceed with her destruction (Place 1978:43-5). In the latter half of *THE CRYING GAME*, Jude is often photographed in ways which express her dangerousness. In the scene where she appears suddenly at Fergus' apartment, the framing at an odd, oblique angle and low-key lighting, which casts shadows from the window blinds on the wall, create a sense of threat and dread. In this scene, she grabs Fergus by the balls and demands that he fuck her. The repulsive tone of this act proves that sexual aggression — a sign of masculinity — is treacherous in women. Later in the film, when Jude is "suiting up" to assassinate a British judge, she stands in front of a paneled mirror which shows her as split off into three images, one perhaps for each of her incarnations. Common in film noir, the mirror expresses the spider woman's duplicitous nature. The mirror also suggests narcissism, a destructive trait in the film noir woman, suggesting as it does absorption in herself and not in a man, which would constitute proper femininity (Place 47-8).

The mirror sequence is an interesting one because "suiting up," as a stock sequence in action-adventure films, is usually reserved for bulky, well-armed male protagonists. As she gazes at her image in the mirror to make adjustments to her appearance, Jude places a gun into her leather purse, demonstrating that she possesses in Janey Place's words, an "'unnatural' phallic power" (43). As phallic woman Jude signifies female masculinity. (This will figure importantly later in the discussion of both Dil's and Fergus' possession of male femininity.) The use of masculinizing gun iconography, oblique angles, low-key lighting, and femme fatale costuming constructs Jude as owning an omnipotent, threatening power that must be destroyed. Jude is set up visually to take the fall for the narrative's disequilibrium — whether she is actually to blame for it or not. As Claire Johnston states in her discussion of Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (1944),

"'Woman,' locus of castration, of anxiety, the source of the 'whole mess,' must be punished" (110)

For all the lack of attention Jude/Miranda Richardson has received in discussions and reviews of the film, it is Jude — as femme fatale — who alone appears on the poster used to advertise *THE CRYING GAME* in its Canadian and U.S. releases. She is holding a smoking gun, although she never fires one in the course of the narrative. Against a black background, the sharp lines of her pale cleavage resemble the blade of a knife.[7] She is *THE CRYING GAME*'s narrative image, a

concept Stephen Heath (1981) defines as "a kind of static portrait in which [the film] comes together," and presents itself as a "unity" or "single articulation" (133). For Heath, the narrative image is synonymous with the film's presence,

"how it can be talked about, what it can be sold and bought on, itself represented as..." (121).

Posters and publicity stills often constitute a film's narrative image.

Teresa de Lauretis(1984), elaborating on Heath's work, adds that since the narrative process is contingent upon the rehabilitation of the object Woman to the patriarchal order, the narrative image is, to be more precise, the image of Woman herself, of her position within the narrative. De Lauretis explains,

"What the promotion stills and posters outside the cinema display, to lure the passers-by, is not just an *image of Woman* but the image of her narrative position, the *narrative image of Woman* — a felicitous phrase suggestive of the join of image and story, the interlocking of visual and narrative registers..." (140).

To put it another way, the entire movement of a film's narrative is condensed onto the image of Woman, and in the case of THE CRYING GAME, onto the figure of Jude-as-femme-fatale, as the poster suggests.

Only when Jude appears in her latter incarnation do the visual and narrative registers of the film finally coalesce. That is, once Jody's overblown fears of Jude's omnipotence are visually incarnate and the audience *sees* Jude as a frightening and dangerous figure, only then does the image (Jude-as-spider-woman) move toward providing the narrative conclusion (the punishment of the bad woman). Up until then, it had been confusing as to how THE CRYING GAME would resolve its two plot trajectories of Fergus' relationship with Dil and his relationship with the IRA.

Yet for all her significance, Jude/ Miranda Richardson receives attention from reviewers only in terms of her first incarnation as "an alluring blonde." [8] The character Dil is the main focus for critical attention paid to THE CRYING GAME. This is not surprising since Jude functions as solace to dominant, heterosexual male fantasies. Her presence as a familiar female type helps balance out the discomfort stirred by Dil's challenge to masculinity.

One could argue that Dil's character is a positive image of transgressive sexuality in mainstream cinema. She is a central, sympathetic, active character in a serious film, which is not pigeonholed as gay. Previously, the few mainstream, queer and cross-dressing characters in film appeared in comedies or horrors, and usually in bit parts. Even more significant, Dil is not punished for her transgression. As Vito Russo (1987:347-49) makes clear in *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, virtually all queer characters in film end up dead, beaten or otherwise absent from the conclusion, yet Dil remains free and transgressive — and she gets to keep her new man.

Importantly, Dil's gender and sexual transgression is represented as "natural" and stable, especially in comparison to Jude's radical shifting through versions of femininity. Dil is constantly feminine because she wears clothing and a hairstyle

that fit a single type of femininity. She always appears in a narrow range of urban and contemporary skirts, jackets and shoes, whether at work, at home or at the bar. When Fergus tries to make her look male, his attempt is thoroughly unconvincing — the oversized clothing and ragged haircut make her look like a woman in male drag — which adds to reading her as constantly and truly feminine. This is certainly a reversal from films in which men, like Buffalo Bill in *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* (1991), are shown as disgusting in female drag and must be annihilated or, like in *TOOTSIE* (1982), as a source of humor for lighting their "nature" and must be restored to maleness. By the conclusion, Dil returns to her true identity as an attractive woman — despite her biological sex.

Still, one should not be too quick to laud *THE CRYING GAME* as queer-positive. For example, although during most of the film Dil is accepted, Fergus does respond with revulsion to sexual transgression, when he pukes after discovering the truth about her. Moreover, we refer to Dil as a transvestite, yet we are not certain that this term accurately describes this character since the role conflates a pile of transgressive identities. *THE CRYING GAME* allows viewers to see Dil as a transvestite which itself includes a range of identities, or as a gay man who happens to cross-dress all the time, or as a transsexual, given that Dil passes as female in all aspects of her life. These are all different kinds of people.

In Siskel's and Ebert's 1993 pre-Oscar special, Gene Siskel argued that Jaye Davidson deserved an Oscar because he had two roles to play: first, a woman, and then, the character Dil. Siskel and other critics have had no trouble maintaining their heterosexist assumptions as they try to squeeze non-dominant identities into male/ female and hetero/ homo binaries. They remain comfortably blind to queer-positive viewers' understanding of the complexity of Dil's identity — that her character is totally imbricated in her sexual and gender identities, and that these identities cannot be conflated.

Queer-positive descriptions of *THE CRYING GAME* differ considerably from mainstream reviews. We speak of the film as a type of drama here, but several reviews refer to the film as a comedy, suggesting that mainstream film critics must see queers and/or cross-dressing as comedic, at all costs.[9] Comedy is a cornerstone of hegemonic strategies to trivialize, and therefore, defuse the threat of Otherness. As well, these reviewers use words like "hidden bomb," "mind-blowing," "bizarre," "sexual extremism" and "perverse"[10] to refer to Dil. Quite clearly these critics use a different reading strategy than those who see the film as breaking ground for transgressive sexuality in mainstream cinema. Even more telling, director Neil Jordan describes Dil as "a beautiful creature" and the film as having "strange and dark things underneath,"[11] while the producer Stephen Wooley explains that he makes "critical films showing the worm at the apple's core." [12]

The attitudes of mainstream critics, as well as the filmmakers, suggest that *THE CRYING GAME* does not challenge dominant straight ideas of gays and transvestites because queerness only functions as spice and not as an accepted part of the film. Hence, Neil Jordan can describe his search for the perfect actor to play Dil as "[sending] my casting people out into the night and onto the street." [13] And the press kit can see the world of Dil as "seedy contemporary London," as "the suffocating subterranean underbelly of the capital's bright lights..." [14] What this illustrates is that Dil is not read as a given but rather as a hidden "dark" secret,

lurking somewhere beneath London's "seedy" underbelly.

Reviewers comfortably use words like "savor," "overripe" and "delicious," and they deploy circus metaphors, such as "high-wire act" and "tight-rope walk,"[15] which demonstrate their view of Dil as a bizarre Other for the entertainment of or consumption by "normal" viewers. This is made apparent in the press kit that was handed out to reviewers and journalists at screenings of the film. The kit includes a request from the director and the producer, asking that writers "do not reveal...the exact nature of the character Dil's sex" in order to "maintain this key element of surprise and revelation for the initial audience's pleasure." [16] Carla Hall of *The Washington Post* boasted that "film critics...have kept mum as if initiated into a cult." [17] The question is: Why should anyone be so amazed? Being secretive about queer sexuality is nothing new. Nor is shoving queers back into the closet so they can pop out at just the right moment for the pleasure and surprise of heterosexist viewers — at a time, we would stress, when gays and lesbians are asserting their right to be out.

Moreover Dil's "nature" is kept secret within the film because there is virtually no sign of her queerness until she takes her clothes off. This functions to set her up as the absolute Other — and the *only* real sexual rebel in the film. The bartender at the Metro serves drinks and general patter in a bar that looks and acts remarkably like a trendy straight bar, Dil's jealous boyfriend Dave behaves like any straight asshole and is never shown as sexually active with Dil, and Jody dies before he could do anything actively offensive to delicate heterosexist sensibilities.

In short, one cannot call *THE CRYING GAME* progressive simply because it allows a central queer character to live transgressively to the end, when the film also allows assumptions that marginalize queerness to remain intact. As Teresa de Lauretis (1990:224) puts it,

"Films that portray or are about lesbian and gay subjects may provide sympathetic accounts, 'positive images,' of those subjects without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation."

Queer viewers are renowned for the ability to read more into films than the mainstream will allow. So it is no great feat to incorporate enough suggestions that can fertilize active, hungry imaginations to produce an empowered queer reading of *THE CRYING GAME*. It is this segment of the audience who is progressive, not the film they watched.

THE CRYING GAME is not the first time that Neil Jordan has used Otherness to spice up the lives of straight white men.[18] *MONA LISA* (1996) features a black, lesbian prostitute as foil for the protagonist's fantasies. In both films, not just queerness but blackness as well functions as "seasoning" (as Jordan's reference to "strange and dark things" implies). Of course, the use of "spice" or "flavoring" is a common feature of noir-influenced films. The hero, usually a "colorless characterization" of a white, heterosexual male (Richard Dyer cites Dana Andrews and Glenn Ford as examples, and considers characters played by Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum as more macho exceptions), stumbles into a milieu that is charged with decadence and perversion, and inhabited by freaks and criminals.

Against this type of backdrop, marked as it is as deviant and feminized, the male hero appears as "normal" and properly masculine (Dyer 1978:91-2). Fergus in *THE CRYING GAME* exemplifies this type of film noir hero. As Jude mockingly describes him, he is a "Mr. Nobody," boring, inactive and alienated. Fergus wanders into an urban landscape where gender and sexual identities are not what they seem (to his "normal" perspective), where an atmosphere of the unknown and the forbidden prevails, and ultimately seduces him.

What is particularly offensive about Jordan's brand of so-called postmodern film noir is that blackness and queerness now function as that deviancy or charge against which the straight, white, male hero is defined as normal. Race, as a sign combined with queerness, exponentially increases the enigmatic and exotic quality of Dil's character, and most importantly, her ability to serve the fantasies of white men. Blackness as sign carries meanings of wildness and hypersexuality that add up to sexual availability without responsibility, according to white patriarchal myths. As well, blackness distances both Dil and Jody from the presumed white, male viewers. Consequently, these characters are not as big a challenge to "normal" viewers' sense of identity. It is not one of "us" who is queer because only the black people are sexually different.

The same reviewers whose word choice reflects their discomfort with queer sexuality also make claims that *THE CRYING GAME* has "no precedent for the way it goes on to explore politics, race, and sex"[19] and that Jordan "celebrates a loving humanity triumphant over nationality and race and death — and other barriers." [20] Their ease with the film's consideration of race and politics belies *THE CRYING GAME*'s own eliding of difficult issues. The film provides no complex, committed exploration of politics or systemic racism.[21]

In fact, it displaces the problem of racism onto the Irish and women. Jody makes the erroneous statement that Ireland is "the one place in the world where they call you nigger to your face." And Jude refers derogatorily to Dil as the "wee Black chick," which serves to further characterize Jude as the villain. We would go so far as to say that, in order to maintain a progressive reading of *THE CRYING GAME*, one must adopt a "United Colors of Benetton" approach, where race is not supposed to matter except to racists like Jude who do notice difference — because, after all, we're just people. Jody and Dil "just happen to be black," a rationale which makes white mainstream critics and audiences comfortable because they don't have to think about the politics of race or feel guilty for reaping the benefits of white privilege. But of course, race really does matter in *THE CRYING GAME* since Jody's and Dil's blackness is necessary for Fergus' pleasure and white viewers' comfort.

After considering the above points, one begins to wonder how progressive *THE CRYING GAME*'s representation and use of transgressive sexuality is. Initially this article described Dil as sympathetic, but for whom? Even if one does not mind misogyny as a convenient plot device, one should wonder if Dil's phallic possession nets her better treatment than other women. She serves exactly the same function that Luce Irigaray (1985:171) describes for women in patriarchal language and social interaction: Dil is an object to facilitate "hom(m)osexual exchange." Irigaray coined this term to describe how patriarchal interaction simultaneously denies women subjectivity and suppresses male homosexuality. Women function as Other

so that men can talk about themselves without having to actually talk about themselves, without having to risk intimacy. At the same time, women serve as a buffer so that direct male-male exchange is prevented and thus homoerotic contact is suppressed. Men swap stories of sex with women or men go out cruising together, but real men never reveal anything about themselves, and they presumably never have sex with each other.

We would argue that Dil's penis does not let her stay a subject interacting with Fergus. Instead, her feminine image relegates her to the object that facilitates Jody's and Fergus' patriarchally forbidden love affair. When Fergus tries to disguise Dil, he chooses Jody's clothes — not just any old thing but the meaning-loaded cricket outfit: the same outfit that Jody wears when he appears bathed in an angelic, golden glow in Fergus' dreams; the same outfit that causes Fergus to soak his sheets in sweat. Reviewers neglect to mention these details.[22] Despite the attention given Dil as a transgressive figure, this suggests to us that the sight of two men — biologically and in terms of identity — falling in love might be too frightening to make this film a mainstream success — for suddenly delicious spice would become hard facts. Jody can remain a flavor as long as Fergus does no more than help him pee,[23] and as long as Fergus redirects his homoerotic desire to a feminine image — Dil.

Jody's death conveniently lets the passive Fergus avoid making any decision about his homoerotic attraction. But it does not remove Jody from the plot. His repressed presence is acknowledged enough to charge the film with the threat of two real men's sexuality but not enough to disturb the comfy consciousness of dominant audiences. Jody can still be seen as Fergus' buddy even if Fergus constantly asks Dil about him, dreams (sweatily) of him, and tries to change Dil into him. Dil, too, becomes aware of Fergus' fascination with Jody. Most of their conversations during their courtship center around the dead man, even during their one sexual encounter. Here, Fergus expresses interest in the sexual activity of Jody and asks Dil, "Did you do that to him?" She replies, "You want to know how I kissed him....," and proceeds to perform fellatio. Eventually Fergus' numerous questions about Dil's deceased lover prompt her to inquire, "Is this an obsession of yours?"

Fergus' interest in Dil, as well as his dreams about Jody, could be motivated by guilt for the soldier's death, but that is far too simple and convenient an answer which avoids discussion of homoerotic desire. If guilt is the only emotion in Fergus' subconscious, then why dream of a mythical Jody — Jody in clothing and in an activity that Fergus never actually saw? He dreams of Jody in his cricket gear at the very moment when Dil gives him a blow-job. The visual meaning of a romantic Jody combined with Fergus' and Dil's sexual act produces a definitely erotic reading — a reading which is supported by Dil's use of the word "obsession" later.

Dil may achieve centrality for transvestites in cinema but that achievement is deceptive. She has replaced the position of Woman. Dil does not carry over a man's rights to a role that transgresses the boundaries that support patriarchal rights, in other words, Dil has no more power than any woman. She is but a '90s version of the good woman or redeemer who acts to help integrate the male film noir hero into his environment and gain greater self-knowledge (Place 42). Today, in contrast to the 40s version, actual women are no longer good enough for even this passive and harmless secondary role.

At the film's conclusion, Fergus repeats a parable that Jody had told him when the soldier had tried to help the Irishman understand his "nature" as a kind man.[24] At the time, Fergus did not understand, but once he achieves the love of a good woman, he can. An essential part of Fergus' lesson, moreover, is that he divest himself of the bad woman, Jude. The film noir hero's success is contingent upon his ability to extricate himself from the manipulations of the scheming sexual woman (Kaplan 1978:3). Dil's bitchy competition with and murder of Jude help place Fergus well onto the path of redemption.

Furthermore, Dil does not represent a significant change in the position of queers in film and in dispelling homophobia. She distracts from film noir's repressed homosexuality and helps shore up the all-male universe that has historically characterized this type of thriller. "In such films," says Krutnick, "the men seem much more at ease in the company of other men (63). The homosexual subtext that emerges in these films, though ultimately contained, is contingent upon dread of heterosexual encumbrance, specifically, domestication within the bounds of the patriarchal family. Unfortunately, this manifests itself in a hatred of women; male homosexuality and misogyny become part and parcel of the same thing in the film noir thriller.

Jody's and Fergus' relationship defines the parameters of *THE CRYING GAME*'s particular kind of male universe. The two men form their bond with each other in the most typically masculine way: they talk about sports.

But not any sport. The each prefer a nationally specific game: Fergus argues for the Irish favorite hurling while Jody touts the merits of English cricket. Jody, however, speaks in the past tense because his race and his class ended his acceptability as a cricket player once he moved to England from Antigua. The choice of these games is significant because each is representative of a national identity and reinforces other differences between the two men that distracts from their differences in race. Jody's black masculinity would be too threatening if that were all that attracted Fergus. Cricket as a sign works like Dil's ambiguous gender to provide distractions from blackness and still allow race to function as a "spice."

The image of Jody in Fergus' dreams, an image Fergus never saw in actuality but only produces in fantasy, sums up the all-male world of this film. Jody's soft, white cricket clothes are heavily drenched in boyhood nostalgia and all the peaceful signs of a purer, simpler time, a time before feminism and gay identity, and a time when white colonialism was at its height. In Fergus' dream, Jody is isolated: Jody has no context or surroundings, only his clothes, his cricket moves and his smile. Jody is a lovely vision of male homoerotic desire — more overtly homoerotic than Dil, who passes as female and visually works as the "safe" gender opposite of Fergus (even after the slower members of the audience have figured her out).

Jody, however, is just as invisible to dominant viewers as any other potentially subversive image. And he is just as dead as any queer character listed in Vito Russo's necrology. He is classically repressed, relegated to the dreams of the main character, never mentioned in mainstream critical responses, and only allowed a physical presence in the second half of the film when Fergus transforms Dil into his fantasy of Jody — the image Dil carries when she punishes Jude for using her "tits and ass" to lure Jody.

Dil plays the woman's role in this boyhood world of games. She is not one of the active men, one of the guys on the team. For added emphasis, her unnaturalness in Jody's cricket clothes proves this because they are too big and obviously do not suit her. Instead, she is one of the girls who facilitates male bonding. As in traditional war movies, Jody shows his new buddy Fergus a photo of his one true gal waiting back home. Dil serves as the buffer between male homoerotic desire: Jody and Fergus can talk about sex and love without having to talk about themselves, and Fergus can sublimate his impossible desire for Jody by pursuing Dil.

A familiar figure in heterosexist representations, Dil's new addition to the role of good woman simply allows Fergus an excuse to dress her up as the man of his dreams. The film displaces male homoeroticism *via* the patriarchal hom(m)osexual exchange and in no way actually challenges it, even though a transvestite is substituted for Woman. In fact, this substitution leads to new possibilities: how to do without any women, thereby eliminating the nagging risk that is posed by their presence as objects of exchange.

Women are doubly erased from *THE CRYING GAME*: Dil as biological male functions as a non-castrating image of Woman. She is innocuous compared to the threat posed to the male characters by Jude's destructive sexual power and duplicitous femininity. As the captive Jody says to Fergus at the IRA hideout, "There's only one kind of woman you can trust." It is not until later in the film that Jody's statement gains its full import, when it is revealed that Dil, as the only one kind of woman one can trust, is biologically speaking a man. Dil as Woman-with-a-phallus acts as a "sugar-free" substitute for Jude the phallic woman. The male characters can have all the sweetness of the image Woman but without the calories — the dangers of female sexuality. Dil can dress as a sexually alluring woman and sing torch songs like her predecessor Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in the classic noir film of the same name (1946). But she is in no way an object of fear, hatred or suspicion for the men in the film. But even as an image of Woman, Dil is erased, for she functions merely as a conduit through which the repressed love affair between two men can be enacted at a latent level. Just where are the women in this film?

A clue to women's whereabouts can be found, ironically, in a more detailed consideration of the construction of masculinity in film noir, In *In A Lonely Place: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (1991), Frank Krutnick argues that 1940s Hollywood film noir is symptomatic of post-war U.S. society's crisis in the cultural regimentation of masculinity. "[S]habby, defeatist and alienated" film noir heroes indicate a problematic relation to the culture's representation of the ideal, traditional masculine hero as aggressive, dynamic and tough (90). The prevalence of traumatized males in these films, says Krutnick, is a sign of

"the disjunction between, on the one hand, the contemporary representational possibilities of masculine self-image and, on the other, the traditional cultural codification of masculine identity" (91).

In other words, since the post-war period, the image "Man" has become a difficult one for contemporary men to live up to. For this reason Krutnick refers to the film noir as the "paranoid man's film," melodrama concerned with "the problems besetting masculine identity and meaning" (131).

Fergus in *THE CRYING GAME* functions as a contemporary re-working of the film

noir hero. He speaks about Western, patriarchal concerns regarding masculinity in the '90s. When we first encounter him, he is a cynical, cold IRA tough who has no problem in kidnapping and abusing Jody. Gradually, via Jody's "seduction" of him, Fergus begins to reveal his true "nature," as a kind, sympathetic, gentle man. Judy recognizes these aspects of Fergus, but the captive is run over by a British military convoy before his hypothesis about Fergus can be tested out. In the meantime, however, Fergus undergoes a profound identity crisis, plunging him into a world of moral confusion. He goes to London to escape his former life as an IRA member and becomes Jimmy, a construction worker, a "Mr. Nobody" who doesn't even mind if people believe he is Scottish.

Dil acts as the agent through which Fergus can come to an understanding of himself, of his true "nature" as a kind, sensitive, *feminine* man. Indeed, the film eliminates the threat of female power not only through the annihilation of Jude but more complexly through the male incorporation of femininity. With his possession of male femininity, Fergus is an example of the new man for the 90s. His femininity is given, not as a sign of deviancy, but as a trait which is natural to men. Moreover, it should not be denied: only when Fergus denies this side of himself is he unhappy, confused and lost. Similarly, only when Dil dons masculine attire is she unstable and unpredictable. As a woman, however, she is *natural*, loyal and steady. Male femininity is solid and reliable because beneath that feminine masquerade lies the authority of the phallus.

But femininity, when it is in the employ of women, is destructive, dangerous and duplicitous, as our discussion of Jude, the only woman in the film, indicates. She is paradoxically punished for her "nature" on two counts, both for violating it and for being true to it. That is, Jude is penalized, on the one hand, for possessing an unnatural phallic power, as signified by her gun, and on the other, for embodying feminine traits such as duplicity and narcissism. In other words, both masculinity and femininity are bad in women. Caught in this Catch-22 it becomes apparent that, in fact, it is in the very "nature" of women to be bad. As Jody comments to Fergus,

"Women are trouble...But Dil — she's no trouble, no trouble at all."

Women are the locus of narrative trouble (with the exception of a woman like Dil). Jude's murder is used to restore the narrative to equilibrium, with human nature functioning as the ahistorical moral authority of the world of the film. The IRA, like blackness, is reduced to mere spice, a sexy charge that livens up our hero's search for moral certitude. Moreover, Jody, as a black British soldier, further severs social and historical connections because a black man, originally from Antigua, can hardly function as a representative of British imperialism, the IRA's enemy, when he too is a *colonized* subject.

Politics in *THE CRYING GAME* are not about groups or social movements or history but about personal identity in the bourgeois individualistic sense. The IRA soldier Fergus divests his Irish national identity as part of his personal quest for self-knowledge. The implication is that only cruel, amoral individuals (by inference this includes all women), who have no respect for human nature can be members of radical groups like the IRA. Those like Fergus recognize that in the end politics, power and cultural oppression don't matter. Especially when killing Jude-as-spider-woman allows one to skirt (pun intended) difficult questions concerning

British and Northern Irish antagonisms.

Mainstream reviews of *THE CRYING GAME* have caught onto the film's "subversive" portrayal of masculine identity.[25] In an article in the *New York Times Magazine* which discusses the new man in contemporary cinema, *THE CRYING GAME* is hailed as touching "anti-macho chords" since it features a hero who "refuses to fire his gun." Moreover, "the two other sympathetic male characters" in this film, the writer assures us, also "enjoy blurred sexual identities." This prompts the reviewer to conclude that *THE CRYING GAME* poses a challenge to dominant sexist stereotypes of gender because,

"Even the country anthem 'Stand by Your Man,' sung by Lyle Lovett over the final credits, is stripped of its rigid sexism by this film, in which evil is represented by a female assassin as manly as [Jack] Nicholson's marine [in *A FEW GOOD MEN*]."[26]

In *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (1991), Tania Modleski makes the significant point that the contemporary crisis in male subjectivity that is evidenced in recent films must be considered in terms of

"the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (7).

These films depict male femininity as progressive, natural, non-sexist, and good, while women, and especially masculine women, are either completely absent or portrayed as aberrant. Men's rejection of rigidly demarcated gender roles, which has been a goal of feminism, can only come in these films at the expense of women. The emancipation of women is forgotten. What we have, to use Modleski's phrase, is a "feminism without women."

Dil's murder of Jude proves that Dil is the perfect "postfeminist" solution, and Fergus as the new man is the film noir hero) for the 90s. When he gets in touch with his feminine side, he can alleviate the trauma of his identity crisis (one that feminism probably had a hand in facilitating, given the film's historical context). Now that men like Dil and Feigns can be feminine, we no longer need feminism to challenge gender stereotypes. The implication is that men not only make better women, as they clearly do in *THE CRYING GAME*, but that they probably make better feminists as well, since they are more skilled at defying gender stereotypes.

Although we have investigated *THE CRYING GAME* as a thriller which borrows from film noir, it is not our intention to try to lit the film into a particular genre. Rather, we wished to show *THE CRYING GAME*'s strong ideological associations with film noir as a way of examining the ways in which the film reworks and revives very particular noir codes and themes to speak about our contemporary, so-called "postfeminist" culture. Placing the film within its contemporary social context, *THE CRYING GAME*, we argue, represents a backlash response to feminism since the challenge that feminism poses to masculine identity is ultimately defused through incorporation (Modleski 10), and this at the expense of the one woman in the film. *THE CRYING GAME*'s potent combination of male homoeroticism and male appropriation of femininity eliminates the threat to masculinity that is posed by Jude's female sexual power (cf. Modleski 82).

This film comes at a critical time when women's reproductive rights are being threatened, employment equity programs are being attacked, and the mainstream is proclaiming that feminism is dead. We situate THE CRYING GAME within other backlash representations that we have seen in the mainstream media since the late 80s, including the preponderance of U.S. TV sitcoms featuring single-father families (such as MY TWO DADS, FULL HOUSE, and BLOSSOM), and especially, the emergence of the female/ career-woman stalker in films such as FATAL ATTRACTION (1987), BASIC INSTINCT (1992) and THE TEMP (1993). All the attention on Dil's transgressive sexuality distracts from this film's virulent misogyny and racism, and its hegemonic containment of male homoerotic desire. After a few screenings, we resented this film for its insidious division of queers from feminists and from people of color. Dil may be an unparalleled image of transgressive sexuality within mainstream cinema but is the price of admission worth it?

NOTES

We wish to thank Leila Armstrong, Lynne Hissey, Lianne McLarty and Michele Valiquette or their comments on an earlier draft.

1. See David Ansen, "Very Dangerous Liaisons," in *Newsweek* (Nov. 30, 1992), p. 80; David Denby's review of *The Crying Game*, in *New York* (Dec. 7, 1992), p. 64; and Peter Travers' review, in *Rolling Stone* (Nov. 26, 1992), p. 80.
2. Kitty Bowe Hearty, 'London is Burning,' in *Premiere* (Dec. 1992), p. 36; Brian D. Johnson's review, in *Maclean's* (Dec. 14, 1992), p. 54; Donald Lyons, "Bloody Miracle," in *Film Comment* 28:6 (1992), p. 42; plus the press kit for the film.
3. See Johnson specifically, but also Denby, who makes mention of the IRA "using a good-looking blonde as lure for a black British soldier"; and Lyons, who refers to Jude as the "blonde pick-up" for a "black Brit soldier." Jude is also referred to as an "IRA seductress" by Michael Walsh in *The Province* ("*Crying Game* has more than one sting in its tale," Dec. 27, 1992), p. C10); as a "deranged IRA seductress" by Michael U. Reid in the *Times-Colonist* ("Emotional Irish thriller deftly observes games people play," Jan. 8, 1993); and as "a tarty Irish woman, who turns out to be a lure for the IRA" by Julie Salamon in the *Wall Street Journal* ("Film: Neil Jordan Works His Magic," Dec. 10, 1992).
4. We wish to acknowledge the anthology *Women in Film Noir*, edited by B. Ann Kaplan, as an invaluable resource in helping us to define the role of the femme fatale.
5. This description of Jude's final incarnation, interestingly enough, appeared in the press kit for THE CRYING GAME.
6. The name "Jude" has immediate negative connotations due to its similarity to the name "Judas,"
7. The text for the poster reads "THE CRYING GAME...Sex. Murder. Betrayal... nothing is what it seems to be...play it at your own risk."
8. As well, the synopsis in the press kit for THE CRYING GAME insists on referring

to Jude as a blonde, even after her hair color has changed during her femme fatale incarnation. She is referred to as "a blonde in a brown wig," even though there is nothing in the film to suggest she is wearing a wig.

9. See Ansen, Denby and Travers. In an interview with Damian Inwood of *The Province*, director-writer Jordan called the film "a kind of unrequited love story... [which] ends in a comedy, in a kind of resolution" ("CRYING GAME builds on MONA LISA," Dec. 24, 1992).

10. Johnson — "hidden bomb;" Bowe Hearty — "mindblowing;" Rick Groen, "Passport to the borders of the mind," in *The Globe and Mail* (Dec. 4, 1992) — "bizarre;" Walsh — "sexual extremism;" Ansell and Denby — "perverse."

11. John Armstrong, "A far cry from the usual Hollywood game," in *The Vancouver Sun* (Dec. 24, 1992), p. E4.

12. Linda Joffe, "How THE CRYING GAME Was Made," in *The Christian Science Monitor* (March 26, 1993), p. 12.

13. Louis B. Hobson, "CRYING GAME director sheds tears of joy," in *The Calgary Sun* (Jan. 14, 1993).

14. In addition, Denby refers to the atmosphere of the bar that Dil hangs out in as "squalid but voluptuous."

15. Lyons — "savor;" Joseph Hooper, review in *Esquire* (Dec. 1992), p.42 — "overripe;" Ansen — "delicious;" Travers — "highwire act;" Ansen — "tightrope walk."

16. In one of the few articles we found that criticized THE CRYING GAME, Caryn James of *The New York Times* described it as "a fascinating example of how a smart, small film can get a huge amount of mileage out of a gimmick [the secrecy over Dil's identity]." She hails the film's marketing as more brilliant than the film itself (in "THE CRYING GAME Wins at Gimmickry," Jan. 31, 1993). As a further side note to this, Miramax Films, distributors of THE CRYING GAME, received the accolade of "best film marketing campaign" from the Film Information Council (*Tire Vancouver Sun*, Feb. 24, 1993).

17. Carla Hall, "It's A Crying Shame! Media with wrong attitude try to spoil nominee's secret," reprinted in *The Vancouver Sun* (Feb. 19, 1993), p. C6, courtesy of *The Washington Post*.

18. bell hooks develops the concept of race functioning as "spice" or "seasoning" for white mainstream culture in *Black Looks*.

19. Bowe Hearty. As well, Johnson notes that "Jordan explores issues of racial and sexual identity...his themes of loyalty and compassion acquire a deeper, political resonance." And in the press kit for the film, Jordan is quoted as saying that THE CRYING GAME "deals with race and sexuality, and love, but it goes much deeper."

20. Lyons. Other reviewers make similar points: for example, Green explains that the film "[maps] out a state of mind...that levels the barriers of politics, nationality, of race, of religion, of gender itself;" Reid states that the film "strips away the

beliefs of several characters whose race, color, political stripes and sexuality may differ, but whose vulnerabilities and basic needs as humans are similar;" and Travers writes, "For all the characters, hiding behind race, sex and politics is no longer possible."

21. We should note that our discussion of the film's reception is mainly concerned with Canada and the United States. We are aware that *THE CRYING GAME* had a different reception in Great Britain, where it did not do as well at the box office, because of its IRA content. Wolf Schneider of *The Telegraph-Journal* reports that marketing the film in England was more difficult than in the United States, He quotes Jordan as saying,

"In England, not only could they not tell you about the second part [of the film], they couldn't tell you about the first. About the IRA, the Irish aspects" (Jan. 2, 1993).

Jordan is quoted by Hobson on the same issue:

"In Canada and America the movie plays as the love story I intended it to be. Because the IRA issue is far more delicate in Britain, it's harder for the audiences to separate the two stories."

In *Maclean's*, actor Stephen Rea explains,

"In England, they have a problem facing the fact that Fergus is a very sensitive guy. That's not how they like to see Republicans portrayed because it is not the thrust of their propaganda" (Feb. 1, 1993).

22. While we do not wish to indulge in auteur theory, it is nevertheless interesting to note that Jordan himself recognizes the homoerotic undercurrent in Fergus' and Jody's relationship. In an interview by John Levesque of *The Hamilton Spectator* ("Director Neil Jordan shows his brilliance in *THE CRYING GAME*," Dec. 20, 1992), Jordan stated:

"In stories about men in conflict, there's always a kind of homoerotic subtext to them, and in many ways that's what makes them so powerful. In this film I wanted to take that kind of story and pull it to a place that the macho intentions of those stories never allowed them to go."

Mark Harris of *Entertainment Weekly* quotes Jordan as saying,

"I was interested in telling the story of a man who wanted a woman only because another man had had her a homoerotic obsession" ("The Little Movie That Could," Feb. 12, 1993).

23. Denby claims that this scene "sends a shiver through the audience."

24. In the parable, the frog offers to swim the scorpion piggyback across the river to safety, if the scorpion in turn promises not to sting him. The promise is made, but the scorpion stings the frog in midstream, even though it means his own drowning because it is in his nature. The figuring of "nature" and its relation to moral authority in the film is a concern to which we will return later in the discussion.

25. In his review, Reid wrote, "Jordan shatters stereotypes." As well, the press kit states that the "main characters do not fit to Hollywood stereotypes" because "Jody is a black British soldier, who exposes his vulnerability...Fergus is a terrorist with a great sense of humanity," and Jude is "an IRA activist with chameleon talents [who] exploits her masculine and feminine traits to further the cause." As indicated in note 22, Jordan sees the film as challenging "macho intentions."

26. Frank Rich, "Clintonian Cinema," in *The New York Times Magazine* (Mar. 21, 1993), p.76

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Fried Green Tomatoes

Excuse me, did we see the same movie?

by Lu Vickers

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In a culture that tends to line up for movies starring muscle bound men named Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, FRIED GREEN TOMATOES has turned out to be the little movie that could. The movie grossed \$25.4 million by its second month of release, not bad for a film that cost \$11 million to produce (Fox). Critics have praised FRIED GREEN TOMATOES' sepia colored depiction of life in the rural south, and surprisingly in a town that favors babes, bangs and blood, the film copped an award from the Writer's Guild for best screenplay based on material from another medium (Weinraub C21).

Based on Fanny Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, the film is a story within a story of Southern female friendship and love. The movie opens when Evelyn Couch, an unhappy housewife, meets tip with Ninny Threadgoode, a resident of a nursing home. Ninny begins telling the story of Idgie and Ruth, two Depression-era women who love each other, raise a child together, befriend African Americans and run the Whistle Stop Cafe. Not your typical blockbuster.

But the film managed to attract mainstream audiences despite the absence of testosterone-driven action. *The National Review's* movie critic called FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

"a modest American film that can be enjoyed by adults and children, natives and foreigners, feminists and male chauvinists, Southerners and even Yankees who never so much as saw let alone ate, less than a rubicund tomato" (45).

Ironically, for someone who sees the world in terms of black and white, the reviewer left out two fairly conspicuous pairs — African Americans and whites, and straights and gays. Maybe that's because rather than dealing with race and relationships honestly, the film attempts to appeal to whites' attitudes about blacks and to straight peoples' attitudes about same sex partnerships.

As for the racial issue, Flagg said when she adapted the book for film, she intended to show a

"different side of the South, because most literature and film about the South are either about poor white trash or faded Southern aristocracy" (Keough E3).

Obviously, she was only interested in correcting the negative stereotypes of whites, for the film carries out Hollywood's tradition of depicting blacks as good Negroes, loyal, devoted and harmless (Roffman and Simpson 15).

Correcting the erroneous stereotypes of Southerners wasn't Flagg's only intention though; she also planned to show the affection that existed between blacks and whites. "People don't realize how much love there was — and still is between the races," she added, remembering her grandmother's stories about how blacks and whites pulled together during the Depression (Clendenin 14). But the film fails at this attempt as well. The Black perspective of these friendships is missing, although not surprisingly so. As William Alexander Percy, a Mississippi planter, wrote in his 1941 autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*,

"It is true in the South that whites and blacks live side by side, exchange affection liberally, and believe they have an innate and miraculous understanding of one another. But the sober fact is we understand one another not at all" (Goldfield 4).

What Percy is describing is the result of racial etiquette that produced a

"stage Negro [which] inured whites to the suffering of Southern Blacks" (4).

Although whites were able to express their familiarity with Blacks, Blacks were required to refer to Whites as "sir" or "ma'am," positioning themselves in a humble manner that

"would make a white comfortable in believing that this deferential mien was not only right, but the way things ought to be" (3).

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES recreates this comfort zone. Blacks are deferential to whites, but we never find out the reasons why. The two main African American characters, Big George and Sipsey, are clearly devoted to Idgie, their boss — Big George to doglike proportions. As Ninny says, "He watched over [Idgie] night and day." At first it seems as though he is mute; in several scenes, he stands passively waiting for Idgie. It's not until she's grown and running the Cafe that he finally speaks. When Idgie is challenged by a Klan member for serving Blacks outside her restaurant, Big George utters his first words, "You gonna get yourself in a whole heap of trouble." We never learn how this threat affects him; we never learn how he feels about barbecuing all those ribs his friends and family can't even go inside to eat; his only concern is what will happen to Idgie.

Sipsey's response to this same incident is to smile and say, "Grady won't sit next to a colored child, but he eats eggs that shoot out of a chicken's ass." As with Big George, we never know how Sipsey feels about frying all those eggs for someone she knows is racist. The film would have us believe she thinks it's funny.

Later, when the Klan captures Big George and beats him brutally with a whip, he

gets his second line in the movie. Idgie runs to his aid and Big George mumbles, "Don't, Miss Idgie. You gon get yourself in a whole heap of trouble." One gets the feeling that either Big George suffers from echolalia, or he exists, as Ninny said, purely to watch over Idgie.

Sipsey does her share of watching over this family too; in fact, she is the true heroine of this film. She risks her life to save Ruth's baby from the evil ex-husband, Frank Bennett, when he comes to kidnap the child. Then, in spite of being injured, she manages to kill him. But for all her heroism, the next time we see her in the restaurant, she is shuffling across the floor in loose shoes, a grin on her face, obviously happy to be at the service of these white folks.

Surely, Blacks did behave this way in the 1930s. As African American author Ernest J. Games wrote,

"We had all done the same thing sometime or another; we had all seen our brother, sister, mama, daddy insulted once and didn't do a thing about it" (4).

However, confusing this sort of behavior with "real affection" as do the producers of *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES*, is to deny the horrors of being Black in the South during this period. From 1889 to 1930 there were 3,798 reported lynchings in the United States, most of which occurred in the South (Commission on Interracial Cooperation 7). Even though white individuals may have had great affection for their black employees, the atmosphere was not conducive to genuine reciprocity. As Richard Wright wrote in *Black Boy*,

"The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly...Indeed the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew" (7).

By denying the complexity of Black-White relationships, the producers of *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* have maintained the Southern white tradition noted by writer James Baldwin,

"to create, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see" (13).

The film's appeal to straight audiences' attitudes towards same-sex relationships is more complicated and more ambiguous though, ('or this is the same *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* that won the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Media Award for "outstanding depiction of lesbians in a film" (Arar FLY 20:D5). And, as Sheila Kuehl, the actress who presented the award said, "If you don't believe us, read the book" (Arar).

The nature of Idgie and Ruth's relationship has been questioned by nearly every person who reviewed the movie whether they read the book or not, Are Idgie and Ruth lesbian or not? Lee Lynch, a disgruntled columnist from the *Washington Blade*, a gay newspaper, wrote,

"Don't even ask me what I thought about the film *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES* which demonstrated the most adept straddling of antithetical worlds I've ever seen. Yes, the lesbianism could have

plucked at those queer little heartstrings, but my non-Gay acquaintances assure me that you didn't have to see it, wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to" (47).

Lee Lynch's assertion that "you didn't have to see it, wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to" has some credence. Some critics, writing for mainstream (read "straight") presses, tended to see Idgie and Ruth's relationship as more heterosexual than did their gay colleagues. Ryan Murphy, of the *Miami Herald* called Idgie and Ruth

"two sassy pre-World War II heroines who loved, fought and defended their land like modern day Scarlett O'Haras" (FTV 11:13).

Other critics referred to the two as "best friends" (Jacobs). When critics did wonder about the characters' sexuality, they tended to frame their musings with heterocentric language, like Amy Dawes, movie critic for *Variety*. She described the relationship as a

"stalwart friendship between the two young femmes, isolated in a world of ham-handed bigoted menfolk...It's annoying that the pic skates over the question of sexuality" (63).

Or they tried to have it both ways, like Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, who while invoking a suspicion of something sexual reduces the women's love affair to a simple friendship.

"The film so ignores Idgie's attraction to Ruth that it would seem tepid without Ms. Masterson's furious honesty. Thanks to her, Idgie's sullenness over Ruth's marriage and her subsequent defense of Ruth against a violent husband give the two women's friendship all the depth it needs" (C3).

Roger Ebert went a little berserk in his assessment of the relationship, calling Idgie a lesbian and saying that it's fairly clear the two are a couple. But, he adds strangely at the end of this assertion, "We are never quite sure how clear that is to Ruth" (D8).

Maslin's insinuation that the attraction was only going from butch Idgie to femme Ruth, and Ebert's curious notion that Idgie and Ruth could be a couple while Ruth remained unaware of Idgie's lesbianism, typifies the response of most straight reviewers. As researcher Christine Hohmlund noted in her study of films with lesbian characters,

"For most observers, the assumption of heterosexuality is so strong that the femme is easily seen as just another woman's friend. But for those who know where, when and how to look, the femme's sexual preference is as unmistakable as her gender" (148).

The sexual preference of both characters tended to be "unmistakable" to critics writing in alternative (read gay and lesbian periodicals and newspapers. These critics were more likely to be piqued because the lesbianism was obviously camouflage to pass into the mainstream. Anne Lewis, of the *Washington Blade*, saw more than a pouty tomboy when she looked at Idgie.

"Anyone still upset that they ditched the 'lesbian stuff' can take solace in Mary Stuart Masterson's awesome handling of the role of Idgie. [She] plays Idgie to the full butch hilt — work boots, swagger, slicked back hair, the whole nine yards. Lesbians can recognize a dyke character anywhere" (45).

Gay critics were also more likely to, as Holmlund put it, to "know where, when and how to look" for erotic tension. Where Janet Maslin saw "sullenness," Diane Thihault, of *Xtra*, a gay and lesbian paper based in Toronto, saw seduction:

"While Masterson is not overtly lesbian, a strong lesbian undercurrent is suggested by the loving glances that [she] throws at Parker and by their affectionate embraces" (19). And in heated contrast to Roger Ebert's contention that Ruth may not be aware of Idgie's lesbianism, Rosemary Curb offers this observation.

"One juicy memorable scene has the blooming butch knocking herself out to please her filmy sundressed lady love by stealing honey from a swarming hive. Slowly, she reaches her long hare arm into the hollow of a buzzing tree and withdraws a honey dripping comb. Bees retreat as Idgie carefully drops the comb into a glass jar and presents it to Ruth with bashful bravado. As Ruth sucks honey from the dripping comb, few lesbian viewers can miss the symbolism" (4).

The inability of straight audiences to recognize the sexuality that appears so obvious to gay audiences is not new. Nor is Hollywood's attempt to mainstream films taken from sources with homosexual implications. In 1936, when Samuel Goldwyn came up with the idea to film Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, a producer told him he couldn't cause the main character was a lesbian. "So what?" Goldwyn said, "We'll make her an American." Goldwyn's response more or less established a paradigm for dealing with lesbianism on-screen — to simply act as if it doesn't exist, and if it does exist to wipe it out. Goldwyn adapted Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*, to film, retitling it *THESE THREE*. In his adaptation, he changed the story of two teachers accused of lesbianism by a vindictive child to an

"adulterous heterosexual triangle in which one teacher is accused of being in love with her best friend's fiancé" (Russo 62).

Although the change in situation did not change the theme of the story — that lies are destructive — it served to distance it from the original source. Censors forbade any mention of the fact that the movie, *THESE THREE* was in any way related to *The Children's Hour* (Russo 63).

Before the film was made, Hellman tried to get Goldwyn to help her persuade the Motion Picture Production Code to lift the ban on lesbianism if the subject could be "treated tastefully." According to Goldwyn's biographer, the response was,

"Lesbianism on screen? Whoever heard of such of a thing? And how could it possibly be done tastefully" (Russo 63).

Apparently filmmakers had no idea. When lesbianism did appear on screen

covertly, as it did in such 50s films as *YOUNG MAN WITH A HORN*, *ALL ABOUT EVE*, and *CAGED*, the women were played as mannish, perverted and predatory. More often though, lesbianism was not even remotely depicted. As with *THESE THREE*, characters in films adapted from sources containing overt lesbianism were simply rewritten to be heterosexual. *THE BAD SEED* and *DIABOLIQUE* both replaced lesbian characters with heterosexual ones.

Only one 50s film dealt outright with lesbianism and that was *OLIVIA*, a French film scripted by Colette. Ironically, when *OLIVIA* was distributed in the United States, its name was changed to *THE PIT OF LONLINESS*, a name chosen because of its similarity to *The Well of Loneliness*. The movie posters hyped the film as being the

"offbeat story of a strange relationship...condemned by the world...
acknowledged only in fanciful dreams...discussed only in whispers"
(Russo 103).

In the 60s film lesbians were either killed off by suicide, cured or asexual. Then, despite the loosening of the Code to allow the depiction of "homosexuality and other sexual aberrations handled with care and restraint" (Hartinger 28), the 70s saw a return to replacing gay characters with straight ones. Studios were still nervous about portraying homosexuals onscreen. When producer Kenny Friedman test-screened his disco film *THANK GOD IT'S FRIDAY*, he studied the audience's response to one gay male couple dancing in a crowd of heterosexuals. He found that

"the gays got it, the straights never saw a thing. Which is exactly what he wanted; he found that general audiences are unwilling to see gays and he made it easier for them. Had there been negative reaction to the scene, it would have been dropped" (Russo 226).

In 1985, Steven Spielberg, director of *THE COLOR PURPLE*, was criticized for making it easy for general audiences not to see gays by turning down the sexual heat between the characters Celie and Shug. He changed a passionate sexual encounter to a few safe kisses. Whoopi Goldberg, who played Celie, said Spielberg told her,

"Middle America simply would not sit still for Celie on top and Shug on bottom, so we made it less explicit. This way we won't offend anyone"
(Russo 280).

The Color Purple is very much like *Fried Green Tomatoes* in that neither book mentions the word lesbian, although both are heavy on implication. The main character in *The Color Purple*, Celie, discovers her strength through a sexually explicit lesbian relationship. Idgie and Ruth, the main characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, are as in love with each other as two people can be. And the nature of their love isn't a secret in the book, even though it goes unnamed. When asked whether she intended a sexual link between the characters, Flagg was noncommittal.

"Well, I'm not really sure. Those were innocent times in that part of the world and I'm not sure people knew the word 'lesbian.' Maybe they

didn't have a name for the girls, and maybe it doesn't matter" (LaBadie NIN 37:B1).

If it didn't matter whether the "love that dare not speak its name" in the book spoke its name in the movie, then why did director Jon Avnet and Flagg alter the story in a way that diminishes the obvious eroticism in the book? Whether inadvertently or not, they seem to be using what Holmlund referred to in her study of mainstream femme film as "specific strategies used to foster a diversity of audience responses:"

1. Making the female lead a femme, which allows both heterosexual and lesbian responses/ identifications;
2. Focusing on the exchange of female looks that can be variously read as erotic (especially when the looking turns into a love scene) or "just friendly;"
3. Referring ambiguously and allusively to what may or may not be lesbianism and/or lesbian lifestyles (145).

The strategies begin early in the movie. Right away, Ruth is introduced as girlfriend to nine or ten year old Idgie's brother, Buddy, before he is killed by a train. One scene has the three walking across a clam, Ruth holding the child Idgie's hand. Given this scene alone, it's easy to imagine why audiences walk away feeling they've just watched a movie about best friends. Then, to further distance audiences from any thoughts of women loving women for themselves, years after Buddy's death, his mother invites Ruth back to help her deal with a still sullen Idgie. The movie wants us to believe that the women's relationship revolves around their mutual love of Buddy, and that given his loss, they may as well settle for each other.

In the book, however, Ruth and Idgie meet after Buddy's death and when they meet it's clear that they're in love with each other, not a ghost. As Ninny tells it,

"Everywhere that Ruth was, that's where Idgie would be. It was a mutual thing. They just took to each other, and you could hear them sittin' on the swing on the porch, gigglin' all night. Even Sipsey razzed her. She'd 'see Idgie by herself and say, 'That ol' love bug done hit Idgie" (Flagg 82).

And, while the bee charmer scene in the movie is fairly erotic, except perhaps to viewers who "don't want to see it," it is undeniably erotic in the book. After Idgie performs her honey-gathering magic and hands the comb to Ruth, Ruth bursts into tears and Idgie starts begging for forgiveness.

"'I'm sorry Ruth, please don't be mad at me,' 'Mad?' Ruth put her arms around Idgie and said, 'Oh Idgie, I'm not mad at you. It's just that I don't know what I'd ever do if anything ever happened to you. I really don't'" (86).

The movie version of this incident more or less began and ended with looks between the women, but the novel goes a bit further, After the two enjoy a picnic lunch, Idgie lays her head in Ruth's lap, Ruth takes Idgie's hand and smiles down at her, whispering in Idgie's ear, "You're an old bee charmer, Idgie Threadgoode, that's what you are..." Idgie smiles back at her "happy as anyone who is in love in the summer can be" (87).

In the movie, Ruth casually mentions that she is going to marry Frank Bennett and Idgie's response is equally mundane. In the novel, however, Ruth agonizes over the choice she feels she has to make in spite of the fact that she is in love with Idgie:

"When Idgie had grinned at her and tried to hand her that jar of honey, all these feelings that she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was in that second in time tha she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart...And now, a month later, it was because she loved her so much that she had to leave...She had no idea why she wanted to be with Idgie more than anyone else on this earth, but she did" (88)

Clearly, something was lost in the translation. Not only does the movie temper Ruth's obvious attraction to Idgie, except for the scene where Ruth sends Idgie the "whither thou goest passage" from the Bible, it all but leaves out Idgie's family's acceptance of hers and Ruth's relationship. In the book, when Ruth gives birth to Buddy Jr., Momma Threadgoode says, "Oh look, Idgie, he's got your hair" (192). And Poppa Threadgoode treats Idgie like a new father, telling her that

"now that she was going to be responsible for Ruth and baby, she better figure out what she wanted to do, and gave her five hundred dollars to start a business with" (192).

In the book, even the gossip columnist gets in on acknowledging the alternative family. When Buddy Jr. gets injured, she writes, I am sorry to report that Idgie and Ruth's little boy lost his arm last week..." (107).

However, when pressed further about the character's sex and orientation by yet another reporter, Flagg emphatically denied writing lesbian characters.

"No, no, no. It's a story about love and friendship. The sexuality is unimportant. In the book, all the relationships are very close, and people can draw whatever conclusions they want. That's what you hope for when you write a book. We are looking at them from 1991. [The 30s] was a totally different time period. There were very warm friendships between women" (Keough FTV 11:E4)

To a degree, Flagg may be right about warm friendships between women. According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, a researcher with the University of Pennsylvania, Idgie and Ruth's foremothers — 18th and 19th century women — commonly formed emotional ties with each other. These intense same-sex relationships were routinely accepted in U.S. society. They ranged from

"supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women. It was a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance" (Smith-Rosenberg 2).

Smith-Rosenberg asserts that

"the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women is...one aspect of the female experience which consciously or unconsciously we have chosen to ignore" (1).

But our "conscious or unconscious" ignorance of loving friendships between women is nothing compared to the ignorance of lesbianism. Queen Victoria, the story goes, would not pass a law against lesbianism because she couldn't believe women would do such things (Daniell 225).

So Flagg's suggestion that people can draw whatever conclusions they want about the character's sexuality leads to some difficulties. While her attitude toward the women's relationship has a nineteenth century feel to it. At least in one interview she attributed the uncertainty of her characters' sexuality to the times: "Not sure people knew the word 'lesbian'" — most of America has a "twentieth century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love" (8). And given North America's discomfort with female sexuality, it's clear that mainstream audiences will choose to see Idgie and Ruth as heterosexual, especially since the lesbiansim implicit in the book becomes coded on the screen. Even Flagg seemed to become more and more uncomfortable with the subject as more and more reporters said the "L" word: "No, no, no. It's a story about love and friendship. The sexuality is unimportant" (Keough). In his defense of his treatment of the movie, Director Jon Avnet said,

"The sexuality had no interest for me. It is what it is or whatever you wanted to think it is. What I wanted to deal with was the intimacy. I wanted two women who loved each other. Women seem to be closer to each other than men. I'm talking about straight women as well as gay women, I think intimacy is the most frightening experience in our lifetime. Sexuality has so little to do with it" (Keough).

But why is it necessary to render women's sexuality invisible when dealing with intimacy? Adrienne Rich offers a clue to this in her discussion of women's sexuality in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Women like Idgie and Ruth who are woman-identified, not male-identified, "threaten family, religion, and state" (24) because they do not come under male control. And women who reject compulsory heterosexuality — lesbians — she argues, can only be perceived in two ways-as deviant or invisible.

Rich's definition of a lesbian is much broader than either Avnet's or Flagg's, both of whom seem to have bought into the patriarchal definition of a lesbian as a woman who "has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (51). They fail to see the connection between intimacy and sexuality and in doing so are unable to see or let us see the erotic nature of Idgie and Ruth's love for each other. They are guilty of rendering the lesbian invisible by using narrow definitions. As Rich wrote:

"[Because the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence...we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body...as an energy, not only diffuse, but, as Audre Lord has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional or psychic' (53).

Rich's observation that "female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic" has affected all women, not just those who identify themselves as lesbian. Our culture's denial of female sexuality has led to the polarization of women — good girls, bad girls, lesbians and straights — with absolutely no shades of gray. Female sexuality takes on many shades and by bleaching it to make mainstream audiences comfortable, Flagg and Avnet have contributed to the invisibility of the lesbian. Perhaps if they had enlarged their definition of female sexuality, the film that GLAAD called "lesbian-positive" might have been "lesbian-positive" for everyone not just for those who know one when they see one.

The same could be said for the image of blacks in this film as well. By reducing Sipsey and Big George to a "collection of stereotypical characteristics confirmed by public behavior" (Goldfield 5), the filmmakers have rendered the flesh and blood African American invisible. The characters exist only in relation to the whites in the film. The words of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* would serve both blacks and gays well as a response to this film:

"I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me" (5).

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Imitation of Life Imitation world of vaudeville

by Richard Henke

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"The traditional gay male culture did...and does have political significance...Directly, traditional gay culture has the capacity to see the constructedness of gender identities, to feel the sensuousness of role play and sexual behavior, to respond to sensuousness and fun. We can also gain knowledge from it (if we pose the right questions of it) about... the elation between culture and gender and so on." (Richard Dyer)][1]
[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

"SARAH JANE, DON'T"

In the much discussed final scene of Douglas Sirk's *IMITATION OF LIFE* (1959), Sara Jane Johnson (Susan Kohner) breaks through the crowd watching an extravagant funeral procession, pushes aside a policeman, and pulls open the doors of a horse-drawn hearse, crying, "I have killed my mother." The pathos of this moment depends upon the fact that Sara Jane is now too late to be reconciled with her mother, entombed in a space that the daughter cannot reach. This image is powerful because it makes emblematic what the film has thematically explored: the ways women are imprisoned and alienated, both in terms of gender and race.

Sara Jane herself becomes the paramount example of this, as she challenges the limitations of her identity. Refusing to be either a proper lady or a proper black, Sara Jane throughout the film enacts a series of "imitations," or what we might more generously call self-fashionings. For instance, her radically disparate impersonations of a rich WASP for her white boyfriend (Troy Donahue) and a sultry chanteuse for sleazy nightclub patrons may be interpreted as subversive parodies of the roles played less self-consciously by the other female characters in the film, the debutante, Susie (Sandra Dee) and the performer, Lora Meredith (Lana Turner).

But her most threatening kind of performance — both as a woman and a black — consists of Sara Jane's numerous public hysterics, as in this spectacle of the last scene. Here flagrantly disregarding the words of Mahalia Jackson who only moments before sang, "No more weepin' and wailin'," Sara Jane openly weeps and wails in front of hundreds of watching people until she is grabbed by Lora who

hisses, "Sara Jane, don't!" Lora pulls Sara Jane into the less threatening private space of their limousine, where joining Susie they form a holy alliance of the nuclear family under the smiling patriarchal gaze of Steve Archer (John Gavin).

This concluding moment of *IMITATION OF LIFE* may seem just another instance of dominant cinema's compulsion to repress women who transgress sexual or racial boundaries. Steve's "policing" of Sara Jane as she is reinscribed into the nuclear family works to relieve a central anxiety of the film: what to do about a woman and a black gone out of control. However, some viewers have found this conclusion hollow and unsatisfying. Sirk himself reassures us,

"You don't believe the happy end, and you're not really supposed to." [2]

Yet the issue should perhaps not be whether the ending is believable, but given the tensions of the movie, whether the ending can be conceived as a *happy* one at all. In other words, is there a viable space for race and gender identities outside the social constrictions which the concluding scene visualizes so vividly?

For the last two decades film theory has explored how melodramas attempt to contain and control women through rigid conceptions of femininity and race. [3] Yet as Marina Heung has suggested,

"Sirk's work has always had a special place in the debate over whether melodrama is an inherently conservative or subversive form." [4]

Critics contest Sirk's films' attitudes toward representation. Does *IMITATION OF LIFE* promote or challenge the genre's limiting constructions of race and gender? As one critic asks,

"Is Sirk's critique of white middle-class racism, dramatized through Lora Meredith/ Lana Turner's upwardly mobile career woman and her exploitation of her black maid, itself based on a reactionary ideological premise of the working woman as bad mother?" [5]

Given the liveliness of the debates around *IMITATION OF LIFE*, such questions have proven difficult to answer. Perhaps a more fruitful response to the paradoxical values in this film is simply to acknowledge that the "real" *IMITATION OF LIFE* is always already a fake. An inquiry more attuned to the film's vision would be a self-conscious awareness of the imitation in *Imitation* (of gender, of race, and of representation).

Or to put it another way, the most rewarding way to view this ambiguous and often conflicted film is camp. Although camp has elsewhere seemed a "trivialization of taste," [6] in this essay I shall defend camp as a complex epistemology. My following analysis focuses on two films, but the analysis' implications are broader than that. As I examine camp's very different manifestations in two Hollywood films, Sirk's *IMITATION OF LIFE* and Mark Robson's *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* (1967), I will suggest a general theory of camp spectatorship.

Calling *IMITATION OF LIFE* camp is nothing new; the film has long been acknowledged as a classic of the genre. Fassbinder wrote.

"Sirk has said: you can't make films about things, you can only make

films with things; with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, in fact with all the fantastic things that make life worth living."[7]

In her "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag makes an analogous claim:

"Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive camp in objects is to understand Being-as-playing-a-role. It is the furthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater."[8]

In these terms, IMITATION OF LIFE seems an extended meditation on the aesthetics of camp. It is a film self-conscious about the artificiality of gender and race roles, with a central motif of life-as-theater manifest in the image of Lora Meredith-as-star and manipulated in the lighting, color and mise-en-scene.

However, to read IMITATION OF LIFE simply as an intentional work of camp falls into the same bind that has troubled feminist and neo-Marxist critics of Sirk, for such a reading locates the significance of the work solely in the film's deliberate, albeit "campy," representations of race and gender. Consequently, the interpretation fails to resolve its inherent ideological contradictions. The advantage of situating camp in a viewer's *spectatorship* is that, while focusing on these problems of representation, not only are contradictions embraced, but as we shall see, they no longer become contradictions at all.

When critics began to re-evaluate the films of Douglas Sirk in the early 1970s, they argued for a significance for IMITATION OF LIFE beyond as more camp, which was then its most avid form of acclaim, As Christine Gledhill puts it,

"Already subject to a camp following, Sirk was now constructed as a Brechtian director, who, constrained by the Hollywood studio system, had lighted on a popular genre — melodrama and with it the woman's film — for the access it gave to the neuralgic centre of Eisenhower's America, which through a range of 'distanciation' devices he exposed in a formal and ironic critique."[9]

While I do not wish to undermine the importance of ideological film theory for understanding Sirk and melodrama in general, I nonetheless want to reclaim the importance of "subjecting" IMITATION OF LIFE "to a camp following." In fact, I want to propose that, in its own unique way, camp spectatorship can be just as aware of ideology as feminist or neo-Marxist criticism.

THE POLITICS OF CAMP

At least before Sirk recently became championed by film theorists, the most devoted fans of IMITATION OF LIFE have been gay men. This may seem an odd phenomenon given that the film represents no overt instances of same sex desire, has minimal homoeroticism and small potential for *bricolage*.^[10] Why would such a film interest gays? The answer, I believe, involves what has often seemed a contradiction of terms: the politics of camp.

Camp has become a familiar buzzword in recent critical theory, particularly in

Lesbian and Gay Studies, but the term remains unclear. Among gay critics, camp has been variously defined as a celebration of effeminacy,[11] an integration of "gender with aesthetics,"[12] and "a relationship between activities, individuals, situations *and* gayness." [13] Yet the commonplace assumption that camp focuses on the dynamics of gender role-playing does not adequately account for why genres such as science fiction and horror often are camp while gangster films and westerns seldom are. Even Sontag's "ultimate camp statement: it's good because it's awful" (119) fails to explain why certain "awful" works are camp while others remain, well, just plain awful.

Possibly more confusing than this is the ontological question of whether camp lies in the work or, as Thomas Hess puts it, "in the smirk of the beholder." [14] While most people might ostensibly agree with the latter, few actually follow this criterion when they talk about the intentional, campy affect of certain stars or of directors like Bette Davis or John Waters — or for that matter, in the street theater of drag. Camp has come to mean too many things for too many people, making a precise usage of the term elusive. Consequently critical discussions employing it have become muddled. Therefore, it is important to understand that here I refer to only one distinct type of camp: camp spectatorship, wherein the *viewer* transforms the meaning of the cinematic text through his/her subjective vision.

No matter how intensely it recently has been theorized, most often the word "camp" in casual discourse refers simply to the flattening out of some phenomenon's essential integrity into artifice for a humorous effect. While I do not essentially disagree with this description, I want to emphasize the epistemological profundity of such an enterprise. Too frequently examinations of spectatorship (such as by the Frankfurt School) have assumed the audience's rigidly passive role; this has been especially true in analyses of classic Hollywood cinema.

However, historically, gay male camp spectators have not been passive. Even in the most repressive times, camp has functioned as a means of gay resistance where it critiques specific cultural values and assumptions, many which are oppressive. This is not to say that camp reads a text's (overt or implicit) didactic meaning. Rather, camp is less concerned with intended meaning than with the production of meaning. Current critical theory has made much of "reading against the grain." Such reading has always been the praxis of camp spectatorship.

I believe that restrictive ideology precipitates a camp response. This restrictiveness may be about gender, but it can almost as easily be about race, technology, science or many of the other ways in which modern society is regulated. A camp reading disrupts rather than stabilizes a text which has inscribed these values. Deeply suspicious of traditional critical approaches to film, camp undermines the universalizing assumptions at which most analyses arrive. Often deemed anti-intellectual, camp only distrusts intellectual systems that totalize experience (which is most of them).

As with so many things endemic to gay culture, Oscar Wilde provides an early and particularly vivid manifestation of this sensibility. In his celebrated aphorisms, Wilde articulates the camp vision. The humor of the Wildean epigram almost always involves a turning of deeply held values of culture upon themselves. The first half of the epigram establishes some familiar social construction posing as natural; the second half exposes that construction as artifice. Wilde praises

construction over essentialism, art over nature — but art that is not mimetic, that always presents a flagrant imitation of life. For example, consider the following epigram from "The Decay of Lying": "The more we study art, the less we care for Nature." The first half appears to be the traditional humanist defense of art as that mirror we hold up to nature, but the second half camps this conventional response by suggesting instead that Art *undermines* our appreciation of the "real" world.

Or take another epigram, this from *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "It's absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious." Here the first half insinuates that simplistic binary categories are inadequate to capture the complex essence of human nature, but the second half ironically replaces these categories with an even more superficial binary opposition, implying that if you circumvent one defining construction, you will only find another. The endless delight of Wilde may be his play of surfaces, but these are deep surfaces that critique specific totalizing ideas which order the modern world.

The now infamous dismissal of Wilde as "slight" is akin to "serious" criticism's rejection of camp as a mindless pleasure in "bad" movies or a willfully misreading of "good" films. However, more precisely what happens in camp is that once the spectator no longer can believe or refuses to believe in what is being depicted (because of distancing through time, style or value), s/he is free to examine the artifice in a given work. Like Brecht's distancing, but much more playful, camp reads signs *as* signs, resisting being completely seduced by their significations. The spectator consequently can examine how ideology is inscribed in the work. Andrew Ross claims:

"If camp has a politics, it is one that proposes working with and through existing definitions and representations, and in this respect is opposed to the search for alternative, utopian, or essentialist identities..."[15]

Given that the inscription of ideology is infinitely variable, camp can offer no monolithic response, but rather it must be remarkably flexible in order to read adequately ideology's many modulations.

This impulse to read ideology points to the importance of the difference between unintentional and intentional camp such as John Waters' PINK FLAMINGOES or, more nihilistically, modern slasher movies such as I DISMEMBER MAMA where traditional humanistic values are often quite literally dismembered. Sontag says,

"One must distinguish between naive and deliberate Camp. Pure camp is always naive. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ('camping') is usually less satisfying" (111).

Intentional camp is less satisfying because it has less resonance. Waters' film tells us no more than what one singular film thinks about (among other things) pink flamingoes. On the other hand, unintentional camp reveals insights about a whole society. Sontag believes that

"in naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (112).

When seriousness fails, it exposes the artifice of deeply held, often veiled social

convictions. In other words, viewing naive camp, the spectator feels able to look directly into culture's dark subconscious.

In another sense, my description of camp as subversive subjectivity is misleading and may not apply to the way camp spectatorship operates even most of the time. If camp were merely solitary revisionism, we'd probably have no community of response, no camp classics, no midnight showings of REEFER MADNESS or PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE. Arguably, camp is by definition a *public* aesthetic, which helps explain why such camp spectatorship becomes a more thrilling experience in a theater than watching television alone at home. Certain values (that can change over time or from group to group) tie an audience together in a community of camp. You might say that this is the way that camp moves from the private to the political. In the gay community, camp has long functioned as a medium to share beliefs and insights prompting a communal sensibility, which has the potential to instigate activism. Significantly the Stonewall riots began with the actions of those notorious purveyors of camp, drag queens.[16]

Political does not always mean resistance, however. In truth, camp often functions as a normative reading. For instance, 50s science fiction often seems to us as camp. Not only do we laugh at the faith people once had in technology, but at that outdated technology. Actually, EARTH VERSUS THE FLYING SAUCERS remains funny because we put more faith in science. That is, we find comfort in the security that we now can imagine much more about computers, rockets and space ships, which advancements in technology have made much more sophisticated than in 1956

Let me give another example: several years ago I saw a screening of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller about psychoanalysis, SPELLBOUND, in a audience of psychiatrists. They found the film hilarious. However, their response did not mean that they of all people rejected the oppressive science of psychoanalysis. What they found so camp in SPELLBOUND was the film's treatment of their profession. Precisely because they *believed* in psychiatry, the film gained more camp possibilities than it would have had for a non-specialized audience. This was because they had their solid faith in current psychoanalytic theory to counter the "dated" or "misunderstood" one depicted in the film.

Gay male camp spectatorship remains fundamentally different from this. Until recently, as sexual beings gays were permitted no role in dominant cinema either as subject or spectator. They had to deny their identity or assume a certain distant from the cinematic spectacle Unlike those psychiatrists watching SPELLBOUND, disenfranchised gay men could not use camp to regulate the values represented. Rather they were forced into a more radically dislocated subject position. Of course, gay men do not watch films solely through their sexual identity, and when they don't, they may be as conventional camp spectators as any other group. It is in considering sexuality and gender that gay men generally articulate their most radical insights through camp.

CLIMBING MT. EVEREST TO REACH THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

Insight into the constructedness of gender and sexuality helps explain why as universally reviled a film as VALLEY OF THE DOLLS is treasured by many gay men. Unlike IMITATION OF LIFE, VALLEY OF THE DOLLS has no critical

reputation I am aware of. It is listed as "bomb" by the four-star system in Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide* (usually a good sign something interesting is going on in a film).[17] Yet the off-handed dismissal of VALLEY OF THE DOLLS by the *Christian Science Monitor* proves revealing:

"A skillfully deceptive imitation of a real drama...[O]n a closer look the characters turn out to be images that have almost nothing to do with people." [18]

Precisely what makes VALLEY OF THE DOLLS fascinating for the camp spectator are the ways that the film exposes the deception in drama, the "imitation" in people. Through a seemingly endless series of clichés about femininity and stardom, VALLEY OF THE DOLLS reveals ways that the naturalized concept of "woman" is actually a commodity, packaged and sold to a public. In its stilted and often inept use of techniques of Hollywood technologies, which consequently now appear obvious as techniques, VALLEY OF THE DOLLS exposes its own media's manipulations in the construction of gender and sexuality.

VALLEY OF THE DOLLS explicitly (although inadvertently) proclaims its own aesthetic of camp in a pre-credits voice-over "poem": "You've got to climb to the top of Mount Everest/ to reach the VALLEY OF THE DOLLS." A camp reading of this remarkably rich film focuses on the very discrepancy between the Mount Everest of its ideals and the valley of its doll-like representations. The Jacqueline Susann novel is essentially a *roman à clef* about what the private lives of Judy Garland or Marilyn Monroe might have been really like if they were metamorphosed into characters like Neely O'Hara (Patty Duke) or Jennifer North (Sharon Tate). However, the movie is not psychological. VALLEY OF THE DOLLS does not depict characters' interiority (one might say humanity), but rather how images appear on film. In an influential analysis in which he explores how stars function in the cinematic text as signs, Richard Dyer insists that understanding the semiotics of stars is indispensable in discerning the significance of any Hollywood film.[19] Such an inquiry especially serves VALLEY OF THE DOLLS, whose very subject is stardom itself.

While the film depends upon some of the most resonate of all Hollywood stars, the actual performers of VALLEY OF THE DOLLS are greatly diminished versions of their prototypes. Unlike Garland or Monroe, who were products of the vast myth-making machinery of the studio system, almost all the film's actors are television personalities. Although television does construct its own galaxy of stars, the TV star system is quite distinct, based more on intimacy and familiarity than the amplification of image perfected by Hollywood publicity. This becomes apparent in Patty Duke's portrayal of Neely O'Hara, who is clearly based on the legend of Judy Garland. Duke's failure to fill Judy's ruby slippers produces an intensely ironic effect as Garland's unique and idiosyncratic image becomes banalized. Judy Garland's passionate voice is one of the greatest musical instruments of our century, but notwithstanding all the wowed looks of the audience in the film when Duke performs, her singing (to be charitable) is mediocre. However, Duke is not to blame; her voice is not her own: Duke's singing voice is dubbed. In other words, this singing becomes not only a travesty of Garland but of Duke's mutation of Garland.

The film's only actor who has some claim to Hollywood stardom is Susan Hayward.

Interestingly, her role of Helen Lawson, a hard-bitten Broadway star, was first cast with Judy Garland herself. Garland was subsequently fired. At that point, Hayward inherited the characteristic beaded pantsuits obviously designed with Judy in mind. For years aficionados have been ferreting out Garland's "lost" screen tests and recordings of songs to find any souvenir of "the Garland touch." The film contains a histrionic portrayal (Duke) of a character (Neely O'Hara) based on a popular myth of a neurotic star (the Garland legend) that found much of its power by a contrast with a series of performances as the girl next door (Garland's early film work, particularly as Dorothy in *THE WIZARD OF OZ*) performed by a phenomenally talented young actress (Garland herself). The construction of stardom can be a complex enterprise.

The film exploits such an enterprise in a montage, which delineates Neely O'Hara's transformation from a simple if talented performer into a major star. We see Neely exercising, taking singing lessons, learning dance routines, and popping her first pills. This may be a fairly conventional example of an hackneyed Hollywood montage, here meant to convey no more than the old truism that the making of a star takes hard work and a lot of determination. However, we can also look at this montage in terms of what early Russian filmmakers envisioned as the revolutionary potential of cinematic montage. As David A. Cook explains, a group of Leninist avant-garde filmmakers and theorists put forth a series of radical manifestoes in the early 1920s denouncing conventional narrative cinema as "impotent" and demanding that it be replaced by a new cinema based on the organization of camera-recorded documentary material. They proclaimed

"both the absolute ability of the cinema apparatus to reproduce reality as it actually exists and the necessity of editing to arrange this reality into an expressive and persuasive whole." [20]

Cook also notes that Eisenstein, in a body of writings on the medium, developed his notion of

"montage as a process of editing as a way of looking at history according to the Marxist dialectic" (179).

Such an ideal has fallen far in Neely's montage. It is no reproduction of reality as it actually exists (whatever that might mean). But in *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* montage becomes the very vehicle by which the illusion of stardom as a capitalist commodity becomes articulated. Instead of having the radical potential originally envisioned, montage here celebrates Hollywood's reifying machinery.

The consequences of this reifying machinery is played out in the most memorable sequence of *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*. Neely O'Hara has a fight with rival star Helen Lawson in the ladies' toilet. The powder room is by definition a rare space "for women only." Here something can be articulated that may be repressed in the male dominated world outside. But as spectators we spy on women who are deluded about their privacy; consequently, rather than being free from our scopophilic gaze, they remain all the more brutally under our scrutiny. The scene has as its premise Hollywood's familiar misogynist belief that strong women only can relate to each other caustically, often in a literal fight. As often happens, they here fight over a man.

Recently released from a sanitarium and about to star in a rival Broadway musical, O'Hara informs Lawson, "Hear you're having some trouble with the show, Helen." Lawson claims the play "just needs just a little doctoring." O'Hara tells her that she can have a part in O'Hara's own musical — as understudy for O'Hara's grandmother. But Lawson informs Neely that she turned down the part O'Hara is playing. Neely cries that Producer David Merrick is not that crazy, to which Helen only laughs: "You ought to know, since you just got out of a nut-house." She continues: "Look, they drummed you right out of Hollywood, and so you come crawling back to Broadway, but Broadway doesn't go for booze and pills." Lawson then orders O'Hara to get out of her way because "I've got man waiting for me," but O'Hara snidely chuckles, "That's a switch from the fags you're usually stuck with." Lawson quickly retorts, "At least I never married one." [21]

Too angry for words, O'Hara physically attacks Lawson and resorts to one of the most familiar tactics of the all-girl cat fight, pulling hair. However, when she tugs on Lawson's, O'Hara rips it off her head, revealing Helen's white crewcut underneath. "It's a wig!" Neely screams in astonishment and wicked delight. O'Hara scurries across the room and locks herself in a stall where she unsuccessfully tries to flush the wig down the toilet. "It won't even go down the john," she mutters, as Lawson pounds on the door shrieking, "Give me back that wig!" Shrugging her shoulders, Neely calls out, "Here it comes — special delivery." As she throws Lawson's soaking wet hair across the room, it falls limp on the floor, completely drenched, a useless prop.

On the simplest level, this scene's camp depends on the discrepancy between two stars' elevated images and their vulgar actions. In various ways, the actresses' confrontation exposes the duplicity of appearances. It suggests that beneath their imperious personas, each is nothing but a "normal" woman, who worries about ordinary things like how to keep her man. A shifting conception of normalcy functions as the touchstone in their confrontation. Each star tries to label the other as deviant, whether as a "dope-head" or a "fag hag." The questioning of each's suitors' heterosexuality becomes an ontological riddle: what looks like a man but is no man? This scene also asks an analogous question: what looks like a star but is no star? For when O'Hara rips off Lawson's wig, (like the Red Cross Knight exposing Duessa) what is revealed is an image quite different from the one Lawson presents to the public. The glamorous actress becomes a feeble old woman. In fact, with her masculine crew cut, the exposed Lawson appears as not *even* a woman but rather an ominously perverse androgyne.

After Neely flees in victory, an attendant tries to comfort Helen: "What a terrible thing to do to a great star like you, Miss Lawson." However, the stripping of her star persona (and its near flushing down the toilet) proves to be a cathartic moment for Lawson. The attendant informs her that she can sneak out back to avoid the people in the restaurant, but the degraded actress proclaims, "No, I will go out the way I came in." Here she intimates that no longer does she need her image, but rather like the blinded Oedipus she is now able to accept herself without any illusions. Indeed, in her final remaining scene, Lawson's character seems thoroughly transformed. This once vicious harridan reveals herself now as a benevolent, if rather world-weary, sage.

The sentimental affirmation that there is a woman's essential reality obfuscated by

Hollywood's construction of stardom, of course, does not come from the camp spectator's but from Hollywood itself, which is deeply invested in constructing and delimited roles for women. In contrast, the camp spectator's project is to question any version of woman claiming to be genuine, and to point out the strategies and implications of affirming "the real," "the natural" and "the feminine."

"WHERE DID YOU LEARN THAT LITTLE TRICK?"

Douglas Sirk's *IMITATION OF LIFE* also reveals the strategies and implications in affirming the real. Nonetheless, a camp reading of *IMITATION OF LIFE* is more complex than one of *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* for several reasons. *IMITATION OF LIFE* deals with the ways the interdependent, social constructions of gender and racial identities, and so its film articulates a more elaborate reification of woman. More important, *IMITATION OF LIFE* self-consciously induces a viewer simultaneously to become aware of the artifice of its representations and seduces him/her into subscribing to them, albeit uneasily. While a camp spectator may simply "read against the grain" as s/he did with *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*, to do so would be to miss much of what is remarkable about Sirk's film. A more subtle camp reading of *IMITATION OF LIFE* should account for its complex relation to its representations. This means that the camp spectator must alternate through a series of changing subject positions, sometimes subscribing to the film's representations, sometimes resisting them.

To speak clearly about camp in *IMITATION OF LIFE*, it is important to clarify that there are different manifestations of camp to negotiate when analyzing the film. Each type implies a distinct relation between spectator and text. The easiest type of camp to recognize entails characters who "camp" in the diegesis of the film. An example in *IMITATION OF LIFE* is when Sara Jane serves canapés to Lora's guests. Irritated at being asked to play the maid, Sara Jane parodies the subservient black by balancing a tray on her head and proclaiming in an exaggerated Southern accent, "Here's a mess of crawfish fo'yo." When Lora responds with outrage: "Where did you learn that little trick?" Sara Jane replies, "I learned it from my Mammy, who l'arned it from her Massah, 'fore she belonged to you!" Sara Jane's actions are a deliberate performance by a character in the narrative in order to expose a racist conception of black identity to other characters in the story.

Another example that may be less blatant but is perhaps more significant because it emphasizes the theatricality of camp occurs when an unemployed Lora pretends to be a Hollywood star before a skeptical New York talent agent. Having him phone her house, then detecting his shock when a black woman answers the call, Lora grandly claims, "That must be my maid, Annie." Here Lora camps the persona of the grand star and exposes the inherent racist social hierarchy that is contingent on such a role, a performance that later ironically becomes a reality. In fact, with her histrionic gestures and overblown emotions, Lora's entire character verges on camp. Her frustrated daughter succinctly expresses this when she exclaims, "Oh Mama, stop acting Stop trying to shift people around as if they were pawns on a stage...Please, don't play the martyr!" Yet if Lora may play the martyr, *IMITATION OF LIFE* is a film aware not only that its characters are constantly performing roles, but that they are deliberately exposing the artifice of those roles through camp.

A second type of camp employed in *IMITATION OF LIFE* entails the manipulation of stylistic and meta-narrative techniques in order to induce a particular sort of ironic *distance* from the diegesis. While akin to the use of montage in *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*, the effects here are signaled as deliberate. Not surprisingly, this form of camp demands that the spectator have a sophisticated awareness of film conventions as well as an understanding of a film's own relation to them. Michael Stern points out as an example in *IMITATION OF LIFE* when

"Sirk depicts Lora's theatrical success in the film as a parabolic burlesque of success fantasies, complete with swirling covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, boundless applause and bright lights." [22]

In making the audience conscious of its filmic conventions, this cinematic cliché reminds us that representation is not reality, an idea which supports the film's central thesis of the imitation of life.

In these first two types of camp, a spectator does not read against the grain of the text because each is deployed by the work in the production of a meaning. Yet just because a film uses camp intentionally does not automatically preclude a camp reading that resists the values inscribed in a scene. As I will explain in a moment in reference to the concluding scene of *IMITATION OF LIFE*, even if a text uses deliberate camp, the spectator may simultaneously focus on another aspect of this same instant. Or to make matters more complex, it is possible to camp an intentionally camped moment. For example, stars like Bette Davis in their late career may have camped their earlier film persona. Nonetheless, the spectator need not merely acknowledge the star's self-conscious awareness of the artifice of her screen image, but s/he may also see such a baroque performance (such as Davis in *WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?*) as extravagant evidence of the extent to which a performer will travesty an image just to stay in the limelight.

Camp spectatorship aids interpreting a film even one as self-consciously aware of its representations' artifice as *IMITATION OF LIFE*, because sometimes a film buys into the very notions it elsewhere challenges. Such a contradiction can be seen in the racial representation of Sarah Jane's mother, Annie. *IMITATION OF LIFE* may be "sympathetic" to Annie, but arguably its sympathy is based on stereotypes, which are attacked elsewhere in the film (mainly through the character of Sara Jane). Although the film criticizes Lora for not understanding her "maid," its own understanding of Annie is limited. The problem of the film's racial representations becomes most obvious in Annie's deathbed scene.

With an "angel" chorus playing in the background, a woman denied centrality all her life gets her big scene. As people crowd around her dying figure, Annie doles out her meager worldly belongings. If the scene is deeply moving, that is precisely the point. As it skillfully deploys the force of sentimentality, it reifies both race and gender. Annie's largess in giving "a nice clean fifty dollar bill" to their kindly milkman underscores the fiction that we all get our moment as the center of attention (or of discourse). Here the film works to erase the dilemma of Annie's marginality. Although Annie finally has her moment of importance, she gets it by flamboyantly reinscribing a racist stereotype of the maudlin Mammy. It is here that a camp reading can redeem moments of blindness, which have long troubled critics of Sirk. Just as *IMITATION OF LIFE* itself elsewhere attacks constrictive definitions of race and gender, the camp spectator can laugh away this scene's

limiting conception of the black woman, knowing full well it is only a feeble imitation of life.

Acknowledging the different forms of camp in film may be essential in understanding how camp functions in any given text, but it would be misleading to insist that the forms remain rigidly discrete phenomena. Sometimes the types merge into each other so fluidly that it becomes impossible to say precisely what a spectator is responding to. For example, part of the complexity of that final scene of *IMITATION OF LIFE* with which I opened this essay — and to some degree the difficulty that critics find in interpreting it — is that multiple types of camp are simultaneously applicable.

I am not insisting that camp is the only or even the best way to understand the film's conclusion, but a spectator may find much to read against the grain in the last moments of this film. The happy ending of Sara Jane restrained in Lora's limousine is camp because she is reentering the same oppressive hierarchy that she has tried to escape. According to the conventions of melodrama, this ending signifies Sara Jane's moment of truth when all illusions are shattered and she finally can see clearly and feel freely, heralding the demise of artifice in the triumph of real emotion. However, if *IMITATION OF LIFE* has taught us anything, it is to question if we should believe these emotions are true.

Sara Jane has proven herself a master role player. To insist that at last, as she cries on her mother's coffin, she is her essential self asks the audience to forget how Sara Jane's character was previously constructed. Sara Jane has deliberately created shifting images of herself through a series of disguises and performances—or in other words, through camping identity. In acting out the role of the "weepin' and wailin" daughter, Sara Jane continues to play a part, if only for an audience of one. She tries to fool herself into subscribing to the veracity of her mimesis. But perhaps "fooling" is not the correct word, because no longer for her (or us?) does the difference between a role and the real thing remain clear or for that matter so terribly important.

As if to underscore such skepticism about integral identity, the film here emphasizes its representation's theatricality. The mise-en-scene's extravagance in the final scene includes peculiar camera angles, a dislocating point of view through a shop window, repetition and extended duration of shots — all of which expose the stylization of cinematic discourse. Even Mahalia Jackson singing at Annie's funeral becomes disorientating. Heung believes Jackson's presence as herself gives the events a documentary feel, but I believe just the opposite occurs. The inclusion of "real life" Jackson reminds us that Susan Kohner is only pretending to be Sara Jane. Kohner is not even "really" black. This realization shatters the essential melodramatic illusion that the imitation is real, precisely at the moment when we most want to feel the veracity of our tears.

A spectator needs to recognize that several kinds of camp occur in the film's conclusion: 1) Sara Jane may be acting out a camp identity; 2) the cinematic text may be camping the artifice of representation; and 3) the spectator may still feel compelled to camp this inscription of sexism and racism. In other words, several manifestations of camp — with their radically different ontological relations to the cinematic text — coalesce here in one imitation of life.

CODA: *IMITATION OF LIFE* IS NOT REAL LIFE

Many recent critics acknowledge the importance of "imitation" in *IMITATION OF LIFE*. It is a remake of the 1934 John Stahl melodrama which was itself adapted from the 1933 Fanny Hurst novel—an imitation thrice removed. Sirk has claimed, "I would have made *IMITATION OF LIFE*, any case, for the title" (Halliday, 130). While this indicates his thinking was closely attuned to a camp epistemology, Sirk and most of his critics also insisted on the primacy of an essential reality behind the imitations. He has confessed,

"[T]he only interesting thing [about *IMITATION OF LIFE*] is the Negro angle: the Negro girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status her bonds of friendship, family, etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville. The imitation of life is not real life." (Halliday, 130)

If Sirk privileges the real over the imitation, the camp spectator, in an important difference, remains content with the form of theater over which Sirk champions realism — vaudeville.

Vaudeville is a fruitful metaphor for camp. Not only does vaudeville indicate camp's favorite axiom that life is theater, but it indicates what type of theater it is — a music hall review which eschews linear narration and instead asks its audience to negotiate a series of unrelated acts of jugglers, comedians and singers. An ideal spectator must not expect theatrical consistency but rather be willing to try out a variety of responses to what is on the stage. With the mere change of the scene, s/he must be able to alternate from tears to irony. In much the same way, the ideal audience of a film like *IMITATION OF LIFE* must negotiate a series of attitudes in order to come to terms with the film's diverse representations.

I propose that what the camp spectator identifies with is not representation but rather the *process* of representation, the vaudeville of representation. Historically gay men have been the main proponents of camp for more reasons than I can account for, but I do believe that one explanation why films like *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* and *IMITATION OF LIFE* speak to our experience is that denied any role in the cinema as spectator or subject, we have discovered that alternating through a series of roles at the movies (as in life) has become second nature. The gap between representation and what is represented, which films like *IMITATION OF LIFE* and *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS* make so apparent, is precisely the space — in one form or another — of the gay experience. The strategies by which these films make the illusion appear real is the story of living in a society that refuses to recognize difference. Through camp, that imitation work of vaudeville becomes our intimate story.

NOTES

1. Richard Dyer, "The Politics of Gay Culture," in *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), 179.
2. Quoted in Jan Halliday's *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 132.

3. Important essays that discuss the relationship of representation and the construction of woman include Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (NY: Columbia University, 1977); Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1982); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988); Mary Anne Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17, (Summer 1981): 30; Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': STELLA DALLAS and the Maternal Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 2-27.
4. Marina Heung, "What's the Matter with Sara Jane?": Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *IMITATION OF LIFE*," *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1987), 35.
5. John Fletcher, "Versions of Masquerade," *Screen* 29, No. 3 (Summer 1988), 46.
6. Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI, 1980), 45.
7. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "Fassbinder on Sirk," *Film Comment* 11 (Nov. 1975), 83.
8. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 109.
9. Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field; An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Worn-out Film*, ed. Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 7.
10. For an analysis of how homosexuals use what Claude Lévi-Strauss has called "bricolage" as a means to transform dominant cinema into gay or lesbian representation, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), especially 62-123.
11. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (London: Routledge, 1985), 170.
12. Jonathan Dollimore. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 311.
13. Babuscio, 45. For a wider sampling of a variety of gay and lesbian approaches to camp, see the essays in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Morris Meyer (London: Routledge, 1993).
14. Thomas Hess, "J'Accuse Marcel Duchamp," *Art News* LXIII, no. 10 (1965), 53.
15. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 161.
16. See Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), especially 167-213.
17. *Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide: 1992*, ed. Leonard Maltin (New York: Signet Books, 1991), 1312.

18. Quoted in *Halliwel's Film Guide*, ed, Leslie Halliwell, 4th Edition (New York: Scribners, 1983), 867.

19. See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). This includes an analysis of Judy Garland which, as we shall see, has special significance in relation to VALLEY OF THE DOLLS.

20. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1990), 142.

21. Unlike in IMITATION OF LIFE, homosexuality does figure in VALLEY OF THE DOLLS. In fact, for its time, the film is rare (and supposedly adult) to the degree that homosexuality is spoken about. But it is a homosexuality that consistently is demonized and marginalized. Even camp is mentioned in the film — Neely describes a Saturday social at the sanitorium as "really camp" — but here the word is used in the simplistic sense as silly which my essay argues against. While these occurrences may account for some of the film's appeal for gay men — and I suspect they do — the way gay spectatorship can reverse discriminatory terms needs an inquiry of a different order than the one I am pursuing here.

22. Michael Stern, *Douglas Sirk* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 185.

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Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit String of knots to orange box

by Margaret Marshment and Julia Hallam

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"History is a string full of knots, the best you can do is admire it, and maybe knot it up a bit more." (Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, 1985, p. 91)[[open notes and bibliography in new window](#)]

"Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently." (Winterson, 1985, p. 166)

At a time when postmodernism and polysemy are the celebrated modes of cultural production, a realist text which aims to change people's minds about a social issue has a somewhat old-fashioned ring. Jeanette Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), was not such a realist text, but the 1990 BBC2 television adaptation of it was. In her introduction to the published script of the TV version of her novel Winterson said that ORANGES

"challenges the virtues of the home, the power of the church and the supposed normality of heterosexuality." (Winterson, 1990, p. vii)

She wanted, she said, to transform her novel into a television series "that would bring viewers in off the streets," but she was determined not to "see it toned down in any way." She hoped "TV can have a moral as well as a social function." (Winterson, 1990, p. xvii)

In this paper we argue that realist strategies facilitated the success of the television version of a lesbian coming-of-age novel. Cultural production aiming to challenge the prejudices of "commonsense" has everything to gain from working with popular cultural forms. The mechanisms of closure characteristic of popular narrative can facilitate the effective communication of radical ideas.

ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT tells the story of Jess, a girl brought up by a strict fundamentalist Christian mother in a small industrial town in the north of England. At sixteen she falls in love with Melanie, a girl about her own age. The evangelical community, led by its pastor and Jess' mother,[1] destroy their relationship, publicly humiliating the girls and subjecting Jess to a forcible exorcism. Following a second, less traumatic lesbian relationship, Jess refuses to

renounce her sexuality and leaves church and home, eventually to go to university. This is the plot which can be extracted from the novel's more thematic organization of events, and which provides the television script's narrative structure. The television version re-orders the novel's loose chronology into a more straightforward, familiar shape of biographical narrative.

At first sight, Winterson's novel would seem an unlikely candidate to adapt as primetime TV drama. It has some brilliant characterization, but a non-linear plot, interspersed with fables and meditations. The subject matter revolves around a young lesbian's betrayal by her fanatically religious mother. As a novel, *Oranges* depends for its aesthetic appeal on formal and linguistic acrobatics rather than narrative and description. It acquired the status of a cult novel among women-identified women in Britain because of its funny and sensitive portrayal of a lesbian protagonist. When it won the Whitbread Prize in 1985, it achieved unusual recognition from the British literary establishment for a lesbian novel. But its lesbian theme hardly seemed calculated to endear it to the BBC at that time. The moral majority's campaigns against homosexuality had recently resulted in the British Parliament's legislating to prohibit local government funding for anything "promoting homosexuality." While this legislation only applied to local government bodies, it created a climate of paranoia around gay issues that made many other institutions over-cautious.[2]

Yet in January 1990 *ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT* was shown on British television to an audience of around six million. It received widespread critical acclaim in the press and was shown again later in the year. Our aim is not to explain this success but to analyze how the television adaptation was able to achieve that success while maintaining the integrity of the author's lesbian message. Feminist criticism has often been cautious about hailing the popularization of feminist works, seeing in the need to reach a larger audience a commensurate obligation to compromise the original work's feminist message. The feminist critic may distrust success itself, and or she may distrust the forms and contexts of, popular culture as intrinsically hostile to the possibility of radical messages. We would dispute both these claims.

We argue that the television adaptation of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* successfully employs the strategies of popular narrative forms in order to secure a dominant reading of the text, one sympathetic to the presentation of lesbian identity as a normative sexuality. Securing such a reading involves the production of a "closed" text. Because "closure" has usually been analyzed in relation to how it functions to reproduce existing meanings and reinforce the ideological status quo, critics have privileged polysemy as the more radical, more democratic mode of representation. However, using closure is often an important and effective strategy in creating oppositional meanings. Readers of the novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* — a social minority of women-identified women and lesbians — could be relied on to respond sympathetically to its focus on women's lives and the affirmation of its protagonist's lesbian identity.

Structuring a text so as to gain that same response from a mainstream television audience is a different matter. Whatever the gains in terms of social equality and regimes of representation brought about by twenty years of feminist activism, the word "feminist" does not enjoy positive connotations in the culture at large. And

what is true of popular interpretations of "feminist" is a hundred times more true of "lesbian" — when the two are not conflated. Feminist and gay politics are accompanied by corresponding sub-cultural production offering positive representations of lesbians in fiction, the visual arts, poetry and film. But very little of this has found its way into popular media like television and certainly not at prime time. The screening of *ORANGES* by the BBC during peak viewing hours, and in the winter season, constituted a significant feminist/ lesbian intervention in the sexual politics of popular culture.

Jeanette Winterson herself wrote the script for *ORANGES*, working with director Beeban Kidron, producer Philippa Giles, composer Rachel Portman, and designer Cecilia Brereton.[3] We can safely assume that this all-female team were aware of the sexual politics of their project, and sought to make their production a positive contribution to feminist/ lesbian politics. For heuristic purposes, we assume that they deliberately constructed the text to close down the potential polysemy of its subject-matter. The reason for doing so was to secure from a mainstream audience a reading of lesbian identity that would go against the grain of dominant ideological definitions of "normal" sexuality. Our aim is to identify the mechanisms of closure employed by the text to undermine the presumed homophobia in a mainstream audience, while simultaneously addressing the novel's original women-identified audience. If this was not how production decisions were made, well — it's our way of telling the story.

REALISM AND PLEASURE

To be popular a text must be both accessible and enjoyable. We would argue that texts aiming to challenge the ideological status quo can do so more effectively if they too are accessible and enjoyable. Primetime television is obviously accessible. Unlike much late-night programming which is assumed to be geared towards "minority" tastes, programs screened during primetime viewing hours are assumed to be, almost by definition, of general interest. Screening *ORANGES* at primetime would therefore in itself tend to "normalize" its subject-matter. In addition, *ORANGES* occupied a "quality" drama slot on BBC2. With its literary pedigree, high production values and provocative subject-matter, it belonged in the traditions of this prestige niche, leading audiences to expect that its concerns should be taken seriously.[4]

Realism provides the most widespread and familiar mode of narration in our culture. Modernism challenged realism's dominance in literature and the fine arts nearly a century ago, but in popular fiction, film, and television, realism continues to be the dominant narrative form. Realism's implied claim that it simply reflects reality, transparently representing that which is in any case transparent — the "facts" — appears particularly convincing in the photographic media of film and television, which, even as fiction, seem simply to record what is "there." Cohn MacCabe has argued that in appearing to "guarantee access to truth," realism hides its own constructedness, is formally incapable of representing reality as contradictory, and is therefore inherently conservative. (MacCabe, 1981, p. 310) Cinematic realism has been the topic of long-standing and complex debate. While we do not have the space here to discuss the philosophical aspects of realism's ability "to show things as they really are" (Lovell, 1980, p. 90), we do wish to argue, on the basis of our analysis of *ORANGES*, that realism does provide strategies able

to challenge dominant ideology.[5]

ORANGES is basically a realist text that works within the conventions of mainstream film and television fictions. Its mise-en-scene pays attention to detail in a way that makes the images seem to reconstruct a particular community convincingly in a particular time and place. Continuity editing maintains spatial and temporal coherence. Consistent characters are developed within a cause-and-effect narrative. All this, in supplying the pleasures of familiar aesthetic form, works to "normalize" ORANGES' subject-matter.

Within this conventionally realist ground, however, the text manipulates references to non-realist genres and modes in order to comment thematically upon the visible action. This is most evident in the opening credit sequences, where Jess and Small Jess are pulled apart in surrealist scenes, set in a fairground and a church. These two settings make symbolic reference to the work's themes of the pain and loss involved in the process of growing up and the nightmare of betrayal. Similarly, a sense of heightened emotion is created at climactic moments in the narrative.

For example, the use of wide-angle lens, extreme close ups and slow motion add a sense of menace to the love scene's lyricism. And when Small Jess wakes up in a luminously white hospital ward, the overwhelming whiteness of the setting gives expression to her experience of unreality. The gargoyle-like distortion of Jess' face during the exorcism symbolizes her exclusion from the church, and the tableau-like dinner at the funeral of Jess' elderly friend, Elsie, (reminiscent of Peter Greenaway's film style) calls attention to the inhumanely regimented behavior of the sect members as they file out indignantly at discovering the now-disgraced Jess serving their meal.

This last example forms part of a more general excess in characterization. Elements of caricature and the script's sharp, sometimes bizarre, comedy have a Dickensian quality of social satire seen also in writers like Naipaul and Rushdie. This satirical element prepares us for the brutal melodrama of Jess' exorcism. The narrative has a snapshot-like construction, especially in the first episode, which embodies the work's concerns with memory and representation.

These narrative tactics give the work a very distinctive feel, a sense of its difference from "ordinary TV." [6] At the same time they are well-recognized variations on the conventions of realism developed not only in prose fiction and film but also in "quality" British television drama. [7] They are features which transform the realism of popular forms without fundamentally disrupting realism's power to give pleasure through the familiarity of its mode of communication.

This power is enhanced when the realism is well executed. [8] High production values not only offer the pleasures of a well crafted work, but also demonstrate respect for the viewer, an important factor for women viewers in works apparently addressed to them and dealing with women's issues. [9] Critics do not usually define pleasure as a mechanism of "closure," but clearly a work will not convince viewers who, in the broadest sense, fail to enjoy it. High production values and the pleasures they offer may therefore be regarded as mechanisms of closure.

NARRATIVE

The structure of ORANGES as a television script breaks with the novel's thematic organization, but it still does not quite follow a traditional realist pattern of exposition, disturbance, crisis and resolution. The script has a structure rather like a triptych, with a finely drawn portrait of Jess and her environment hinged on either side of the central plot action, Jess' relationship with Melanie and the crisis of the exorcism. The "before," which maps out the physical and moral space of Jess' childhood through a series of scenes and events in her seventh year, conforms to the structure of introductions to such biographical narratives in television fiction. The ordinariness of Jess' childhood experience characterizes this first episode, just as the ordinariness of adolescent disaffiliation, as Jess develops a sense of her own identity, characterizes the third.

The second episode contains the narrative crisis when the equilibrium of Jess' biographical trajectory from childhood through adolescence to maturity is disrupted by her relationship with Melanie and her conflict with family, church and community. This episode concludes with an uneasy resolution, in which, despite her outer repentance, Jess remains faithful to her love for Melanie, leaving the third episode to resolve the ambiguities of this compromise, with confirmation of Jess' lesbian identity through her relationship with Katy and her subsequent departure from the church. In thus framing the "crisis" of Jess' biography within a context of recognizably typical events and situations, the extraordinary is contained within the ordinary. This context of familiarity facilitates audience empathy with a protagonist whose identity and experience fall outside dominant ideological constructions of femininity.

GOODIES AND BADDIES

The opposition between Jess' sexuality and the evangelical sect in which she grows up structures the narrative conflict. It represents a special case of the widespread debates around the morality of homosexuality in Christian discourse and practice. However, the "specialness" of the case in ORANGES enables the text to eschew debate in favor of a strategy designed to encourage a mainstream audience to empathize with the lesbian protagonist against the church. The text does this through the simple and time-honored device of portraying one side in the conflict positively and sympathetically and the other side negatively and unsympathetically.

The evangelical sect in ORANGES is so dogmatic and intolerant as to constitute a picture of fanaticism. It does not debate issues. When the sect members discover the relationship between Jess and Melanie, they condemn it unreservedly as "a great sin," and accept the Pastor's explanation that "these children are full of demons." Since few British viewers would concur that lesbianism is caused by demons, the text supplies no recognizably "normal" interpretation of Jess' sexuality against which they might measure its representation from her point of view. Nor would many approve of the evangelicals' method of dealing with sexual "deviance."

They cow Melanie into submission by the public humiliation, and subject the less compliant Jess to an exorcism in which they forcibly hold her down, tie her up and gag her, in order to "pray over" her. This very painful scene, far more violent than its equivalent in the novel, which makes no mention of physical force, shows Jess dressed in school uniform, including knee-length white socks. She looks, therefore, more like a child than a sexually active adolescent. The sect members, adrenaline

clearly flowing, appear morally repugnant: four adults grunting and panting as they terrorize a young girl. The participation of Jess' mother in the violence suggests the power of extremist ideologies to corrupt family relations. And the gargoyle-like distortion of Jess' face signifies the moral ugliness of the scene. There can be no doubt that this confrontation between lesbianism and religion represents the latter as a cruel and violent oppressor, with the former its pitiful victim. In other words, here Christianity, not lesbianism, represents "deviance."

As an example of the oppression of lesbian women, this scene is very powerful. Few could claim that the world treats those it defines as deviant more kindly than the faithful treat Jess. Comparison with the novel's less violent account of the same "event," however, reminds us of the scene's constructed nature. Winterson can communicate with a readership of women-identified women through irony and understatement in her novel because she can assume in them a range of knowledge and sentiment that may have already potentially sensitized them to her meanings. But the less defined audience of television drama may need more persuasion. So the more graphically physical dramatization of the violence done to Jess arises not only from the differing demands of drama and prose fiction. It arises too from the need for a rhetorical strategy to represent the oppression of a young lesbian, which aims to leave no space for the viewer to respond except with unqualified sympathy for Jess and outrage at the faithful.[10]

In the context of British culture this strategy might seem likely to succeed. The British media has a long history of hostility towards minority religions, from Moonies to Islamic fundamentalists to New Age travelers. This representation of an evangelical sect as "mad and bad" falls in line with cultural prejudices about religious "extremism." The text's strategy can be seen as one that uses one unpopular minority in order to present another unpopular minority in a favorable light.[11]

NATURAL PASSIONS

By contrast, *ORANGES* portrays the lesbian relationship between Jess and Melanie precisely within the culture's conventional representations of "young love." When Jess first meets Melanie, the camera positions the viewer to share Jess' point of view, traveling up Melanie's arm until it reveals her angelic face surrounded by cascading blonde curls. It is a classic instance of the "male gaze" transposed into a lesbian context. (Mulvey, 1975; Stacey, 1988) Theirs is the only relationship in the work to show evidence of that fusion of companionship, affection and sexual passion that our culture defines as "love." Neither of the two "normal" heterosexual couples portrayed in the text functions to define Jess' lesbian relationship as "deviant." The sketchily depicted relationship between Melanie and Ian serves as a signifier of Melanie's betrayal of Jess, while Mother's dominance of the impenetrably passive William could not, in our culture, serve as a model of married bliss against which to judge Jess' relationship. On the contrary, it is in contrast with Jess' relationship that the others might be found wanting.

ORANGES therefore takes for granted that which the dominant ideology would marginalize. It invests the "deviant" relationship with all the highly valued qualities that "normal" relationships supposedly possess, while denying such qualities to those "normal" relationships. It thus establishes within itself an oppositional commonsense position that claims a lesbian relationship between two adolescent

girls as the moral, and therefore cultural, norm. This taken-for-granted ground allows space to make distinctions: Jess is more committed than Melanie and she loves Melanie more than she loves Katy. Far from being unique or all the same, lesbian relationships are seen to be as different from each other, and just as fraught and fragile, as commonsense already defines any adolescent passion. This makes lesbianism "normal," and because, according to the dominant ideology, the "normal" is "natural" and the "natural" is "right," the logic of the text makes lesbianism "right" too.

Phillippa Giles, the producer of *ORANGES*, said,

"We decided to make it obvious that the girls were having a sexual relationship, not a wishy-washy thing." (Quoted in Hinds, 1992, p. 165)

This was not how everyone understood it, however. The reviews in the British press tended to see the relationship between Jess and Melanie either as a comical comeuppance for Jess' fanatically religious mother or as "innocent" romance. (Hinds, 1992, pp. 165-7) In this vein, two scenes in the second episode have polysemic possibilities particularly worthy of closer attention. We call them "the seduction" and "the love-making."

The first, "the seduction," occurs shortly after Jess and Melanie have met, in the evangelical church where Jess preaches. Melanie is "saved" in response to Jess' appeal for converts. The congregation sing the hymn "He Touched Me" slowly and seductively while Melanie responds as if in a trance, gazing all the while into Jess' eyes. Superimposing the religious conversion and sexual seduction upon each other collapses the two emotional worlds in which Jess lives — that of her religious faith and that of her erotic love.

Jess' clear command of the situation means viewers could read the scene either as showing her exploiting Melanie's sexual feelings for religious ends, or as exploiting Melanie's religious feelings to seduce her sexually. Or they could read it as demonstrating the fusion of religion and sexual passion in Jess. Or as portraying the girls' mutual subversion of a situation which embodies the institutional (male) power of the church. While the Pastor and congregation anticipate Melanie's submission to their authority, the two girls establish their own definition of what is happening, ironically securing the community's celebration of their sexual relationship at the moment of its inception — clearly not what the congregation would want.

The "love-making" scene occurs shortly afterwards. The girls spend the night making love in the house of Jess' friend Elsie, an elderly church member. Their love-making is portrayed with a mixture of humor, passion and lyricism, marked by elements of ferocity and even danger. Their talk of men as beasts and the slow-motion close ups of their laughing faces are threateningly surreal while the accompanying theme music evokes the nightmarish credit sequences. The scene is intercut with shots of Elsie asleep and the Mother reading the Bible in bed. These intercut images may ironically point to how the girls have subverted adult assumptions about the universality of heterosexuality since those assumptions, far from preventing girls' sexual liaisons, actively facilitate them.

Or the Mother's wakefulness may suggest the threat that will materialize when she

discovers their relationship. The release of this narrative tension is not represented as orgasm. This ellipsis may, of course, be due to self-censorship, but its effect is to leave the sense of danger hanging — a danger cathartically resolved much later in the exorcism's narrative violence. The scene ends lyrically as the two, naked, watch the dawn together. Jess says, "This can't be unnatural passion, can it?" The answer is clearly "yes" and "no" — depending on who is defining "unnatural."

The scene's explicit sexuality, much heralded in the British press, does not occur in the novel. This change suggests that the television text was designed to challenge head-on assumptions about the "innocence" or "prettiness" of both youth and femininity. The television script does not fudge the kind of sexuality involved in a lesbian relationship. It does not attempt to present lesbian love as less sexual than heterosexual love, or lesbian sex as somehow "nicer" than heterosexual sex. Nor does it deny that passion may be tense and greedy as well as gushing.

AN ORDINARY GIRL

The text also controls potential responses to its portrayal of the conflict between religion and sexuality through its characterization. The most immediate source of pleasure that *ORANGES* offers women viewers is the opportunity to identify with a female protagonist. The novel facilitates this identification by means of a first-person narration, which ensures that the reader sees all the fictional events from the narrator's point of view. Television fictions represent first-person narration by means of voice-over, which occurs here briefly but significantly at the beginning and end of *ORANGES*. Otherwise, point of view is controlled by the narrative centrality of the principal character and by the camera's relation to her.

Jess is the central character of the drama, as of the novel (except that her name is no longer the same as the author's). *ORANGES* tells her story and keeps her constantly on screen. Such centrality in itself invites audience identification and is further encouraged by Jess's strong character: intelligent, sensitive, principled, and strong enough to triumph over ill-treatment.

The performances of Emily Aston as Small Jess and Charlotte Coleman as the adolescent Jess function importantly in presenting Jess's character visually and influencing audience response to her and her sexuality.^[12] In the first episode Emily Aston's portrayal of the seven-year-old Jess endears the character to viewers through the competence with which this very young actor fulfills a demanding role, while the script constructs Small Jess as a competent character. Small Jess invites both audience sympathy through her vulnerability as a child and admiration through her ability to cope with her environment. She represents a child's uncorrupted perception, puncturing the (perhaps unwitting) hypocrisy of adults. Her innocent logic, a source of a great deal of humor, both opposes her mother's religious world view and derives from it. When her mother accuses the (lesbian) women who run the sweet shop of "unnatural passions," Small Jess understands these to be chemicals in the sweets. At another moment, she shows up the triteness of the schoolteacher's remark, "Winning doesn't matter," by asking, "Why do you give prizes then?" This mix of sympathy and admiration the audience has for Small Jess informs their responses to the development of her character as the older Jess, especially important when she has to confront her community's hostility to her sexuality.

Jess' most admirable quality in this confrontation derives from her early independence of mind: her principled insistence that her sexuality does not, as the church maintains, constitute a sin. The most dramatic, and most explicit, expression of her position occurs in the second episode. She challenges the Pastor's denunciation of her relationship, declaring her love for Melanie, and quoting scripture back at him: "St. Paul says in Romans, Chapter Fourteen, 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unnatural in itself; it is made unnatural by those who think it is unnatural.'" Referring to her love for Melanie, she affirms that she will never "learn to hide what's good." Jess' subsequent repentance and reintegration into the church somewhat blur these explicit statements on the morality of lesbian sexuality.

Should viewers understand the clandestine nature of her meeting with Melanie and later relationship with Katy as evidence of Jess' hypocrisy, confusion or inner strength? The violence of the sect's opposition to lesbianism encourages a reading sympathetic to Jess, as do the moral comparisons between Jess and Melanie (who does renege on the relationship) and between Jess and Miss Jewsbury (a lesbian sect member who hides her sexuality as a matter of policy).

UNNATURAL PASSION

The Pastor is a character much expanded from a relatively shadowy figure in the novel. More than any other character, he embodies the authority and values with which Jess comes into conflict. It is he who publicly denounces Jess and Melanie, who takes charge of Jess' exorcism, and with whom there is no final reconciliation. He represents the power of the religious institution and its roots in patriarchy. As Jess' chief opponent, both narratively and ideologically, his characterization clearly functions to demarcate how Jess and her values can be read.

He occupies that depressingly familiar position of the only male in the group serving as its leader, a position unlikely to endear him to contemporary female audiences, especially since he so clearly revels in the power and prestige he gains. He is hull-necked, is clean-shaven to the point of looking scrubbed of hair, wears his clothes a trifle too tight and has a stentorian voice modulated to oily whispers. We are not privy to the Pastor's thoughts, so we must judge him as we see him.

What we see is a striking example of hypocrisy, not necessarily conscious, but a sublimation of physical desire into the pleasures of self-righteous power. When he rails against "unnatural passions," he carries no conviction. Jess clearly possesses a natural passion in comparison to the repressed desire that seems to ooze through his constructed asexuality. When he accuses Jess of having "taken on a man's appetites," we cannot believe him. The Pastor is the only man around with appetites, and Jess' are clearly nothing like his. His pious rage most obviously reveals patriarchy at bay. The script's construction of the Pastor as villain, together with Kenneth Cranham's convincing performance is a successful textual strategy of closure.[13] With such an opponent, Jess could only win hands down in a bid for audience sympathy.

WHAT A WOMAN!

Much more complex is Jess' relationship with her mother. Played by Geraldine McEwan, the Mother is undoubtedly the most memorable character in the work.

The impact of the Mother as a character lies in her monstrous excess, which is at the same time the source of her appeal. This excess stems from the single-mindedness of her religious conviction, which informs all aspects of her life and relationships. Perhaps all mothers have a monstrous dimension in their children's eyes, merely by virtue of their omnipresence, so that audiences' empathy with Jess is one that invites memories of viewers' own childhood. Such an invitation is reinforced in the first episode by the frequency with which low-angle shots assume Small Jess' perspective. Perhaps this mother appears unusually overpowering because she holds an oppositional worldview, rendering visible her "indoctrination" of her child. For example, while her plan for Jess to become a missionary may seem peculiarly authoritarian, perhaps only the plan's explicitness distinguishes it from the hopes of most other mothers. Many of us have surely said, as Jess does,

"I'm not what she wants. I'm not what she intended. I've gone a different way."

However, the Mother's character also offers a kind of pleasure to women viewers. The strength of her conviction is the source of her power. Informed by the confidence and determination it gives her, she runs the home, brings up Jess apparently single-handedly, commits time and energy to the church, and builds a bathroom. She has great mental and physical energy. This is powerfully conveyed through McEwan's performance. Known to viewers from other TV and stage roles, McEwan clearly plays a character not her own. Audience awareness of the actor's virtuosity is both pleasurable in itself and lends distance to a character whose excesses might otherwise evoke a more narrowly hostile response.

In patriarchy women can only realize power through struggle and expending energy of a magnitude such as the Mother possesses. Notwithstanding doubts women viewers may have about the uses to which she puts her energy, the spectacle of the Mother's command of herself and situations is awesome. The logic of her convictions differs from that of society's commonsense. Her behavior often appears comically inappropriate if not downright mad.

For example, she builds a bathroom not because she needs one but because the Lord told her to. She considers Jesus an effective alternative to an airing cupboard for growing hyacinths, and she wishes "the boils of Egypt" and "the ulcers and the scurvy and the itch of which you cannot be cured" upon the next door neighbor for "fornicating" on the Sabbath. It is not comedy at her expense, however, for she is always triumphant. She builds the bathroom, the hyacinths grow without an airing cupboard, the next-door neighbor is both silenced and spotty, and she at least regards these as the proof of her convictions.

Many of her adversaries are unsympathetically portrayed: the faithful are stereotypically coded as elderly women lacking intelligence and conviction; the next-door neighbor is an unattractive youth; the schoolteacher is locked into a timid conformity. These characters do not, therefore, constitute a convincing position from which we might be encouraged either to ridicule or condemn the character of the Mother. Even the more likable characters who befriend Jess function more to demonstrate the Mother's shortcomings than to supply an alternative model.

It is by no means fanciful to compare the Mother with popular images of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. As dogmatic, powerful, middle-aged women, both invite the same mix of admiration, incredulity, disapproval and passionate hatred. But the Mother, seen in relation to Jess, has another dimension — she loves her daughter. "Be careful with her," she says when entrusting Jess to the temporary care of another woman, "She's my joy." At moments her singular vision has a genuinely critical edge, as when she dismisses the importance of a school test with, "It's how you live your life that's the test."

Jess is, as the saying goes, "her mother's daughter." Jess inherits her mother's strength of conviction, principled insistence on pursuing openly what she thinks is right, passion, logic, and combativeness. Whether or not, as she says of her mother, Jess also "likes to wrestle," Jess does wrestle. In affirming her lesbian identity, Jess becomes, as novelist Winterson said of herself, an evangelist. As a result, Jess is her mother's only equal as an adversary in a battle in which neither defeats the other. Their shared strength constitutes the bond between them, the mother's bequest to the daughter.

A theme of betrayal is strong in Winterson's novel:

"There are different sorts of treachery, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. She burnt a lot more than the letters that night in the backyard. I don't think she knew. In her head she was still queen, but not my queen any more." (Winterson, 1985, p. 110)

There is no doubting the drastic nature of the rift between mother and daughter in the television version of *ORANGES*. However, the more central role given to the Pastor means that the struggle between mother and daughter occurs as part of a conflict between Jess and the church. While the novel concludes by showing the rift between mother and daughter as irretrievable, its non-linear narrative facilitates an emotionally complex reading of the relationship. To have emphasized a theme of betrayal in the chronologically simpler structure of the drama would have emphasized the conflict between the two women at the expense of demonstrating the bonds that unite them.

The concluding scene of the television version depicts a reconciliation (albeit a partial one) very different in mood from the powerful sense of dissatisfaction with which the novel ends. Like the book, the drama portrays no settling of accounts between mother and daughter, but the script suggests that the Mother has recognized the rift between them and is implicitly acting to heal it. Through facial expression and body language she also distances herself from the Pastor's hostility towards Jess. The work ends, then, with a pleasurable sense of recognition, as Jess smiles at the spectacle of her mother calling up "electronic believers all over the North West" on the CB radio she has built herself. Jess has not kissed her mother, but, seeming to recognize the extent to which her mother remains indomitably the same, has accepted what reconciliation the Mother can offer. While not quite a resolution, this does provide a satisfactory closure that leaves the viewer with a sense of hope encapsulated in the gentle comedy of the scene.

"Fatherhood is a fiction" suggests Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses*,^[14] meaning that whereas women know which children they have borne, the biological link between father and child can only be assumed, so that fatherhood becomes a matter of

choice, a spiritual rather than a genetic connection. Fatherhood is a fiction for Jess because William plays no active part in her life. Since Jess is an adopted child, for her, motherhood is also a fiction, a choice, a spiritual connection. Yet it is none the less true and powerful for that.

ORANGES uncompromisingly denies the role of nature in the mother/ daughter relationship. It dismisses biological determinism as ruthlessly and effectively as the Mother dismisses Jess' biological mother. "I'm your real mother," she says, and the text proves her right: the natural mother is never spoken of again. The dynamic of the relationship between Jess and the Mother is worked through in terms of their filial bond. The script makes no attempt to explain their difference as due to the absence of a blood tie. This offers a strong and liberating message. It claims that who we are might derive from circumstance but is not written in our genes. Human choice shapes even our most intimate relations.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST

Jess' relations with her mother, lovers and friends take place within a predominantly female community. To see such a world of women in itself provides pleasure for women viewers. But it is no feminist utopia. As well as friendship, support and love, it includes jealousy, prejudice and cruelty. The script does not idealize women's relations, but it does prioritize them over those of and with men.

History has made women's inheritance invisible. ORANGES portrays aspects of our history. Jess inherits generations of women's experience through her elderly friend Elsie, through Cissy, who gives her a home and a job in the funeral parlor after the break with her mother, and above all through the Mother herself. The wealth of stories that the Mother tells Jess expresses this inheritance most strongly: stories from the Bible, stories about the conversion of sinners, about her own conversion, about her own past when she "was slim." Here we see the largely oral tradition of women transmitted through the stories mothers tell their children in the course of everyday life. In this way, both novel and television program create narratives that bypass the official histories of men to dwell upon the intimate histories of women.

The narrative never offers the viewer a masculine point of view, and the camera does so only rarely in brief shot reverse shot exchanges. With the important exception of the Pastor, male characters and concerns are marginalized in ORANGES. William, Jess' father, remains silent throughout, until he says "amen" in the last scene, Graham, against whose attractions Jess is warned, serves merely as a foil for her relationship with Melanie; Ian, Melanie's fiancé, signifies Melanie's betrayal of Jess. Both young men have, in any case, very small roles. Jess and Melanie in the love scene laugh at the beastliness of men and dismiss marriage. As Melanie says, "You have to cook and clean all the time." They compare their relationship to that of David and Jonathan, who were married, but "loved each other best."

Such a dismissal of marriage, through narrative and dialogue, effects a marginalization of men in Jess' consciousness, which is explicit in the book:

"As far as I was concerned men were something you had around the place, not particularly interesting, but quite harmless." (Winterson, 1985, p. 126)

All Jess' important relations are with women and girls, and no female character is shown as having an important relationship with a man. The result is that relations between women and, most significantly, lesbian relations never appear in a context that foregrounds women's position in the heterosexual institutions of the couple or the family.

YOU CAN ALWAYS TELL ONE

Homophobic ideology maintains that homosexual people are identifiable by how they look. In the novel, Winterson's narrator explicitly denies that her sexual preference for women means that she is "aping men." (Winterson, 1985, p. 125) In the television drama the casting and characterization embody this denial. None of the lesbian characters, or those involved in lesbian relationships, conform visually to butch stereotypes. On the contrary, the visual iconography may be seen as calculated to challenge them. Jess, both as child and adolescent, is visually coded as "normal." Whereas in the novel she says she never wears skirts (Winterson, 1985, p. 126), in the drama she wears trousers only once. Presumably the television drama calculatedly avoided any suggestion of butch. Melanie resembles a pre-Raphaelite heroine, a stereotype of femininity in direct opposition to the butch stereotype. Women-identified viewers might recognize Melanie as femme, but others might interpret her appearance as explaining why anyone, including another girl, would fall in love with her.

Katy, with whom Jess has a less intense relationship, is by contrast coded as a sixties teenager, keen on pop music, and dressed in contemporary teenage fashion. Katy's physical appearance would identify her as what the British call "Asian." This constitutes an important inclusion of Black women within the lesbian community. [15] The clear message is that, contrary to stereotypical beliefs, no identifiable "lesbian type" exists. Lesbianism is represented as common to all types of women, regardless of appearance, personality, age or ethnic origin. The television text denies viewers the possibility of identifying lesbians by any particular set of visible characteristics.

Because no other adolescent girls appear in the drama, lesbianism appears not only normal, but normative. The two boys who approach Katy and Jess in the fairground are gently and jokingly dismissed. Despite the suspicions of the faithful, Jess has no interest in Graham. Seen from Jess' point of view, Melanie's impending marriage to Ian, coded as a scruffy and arrogant youth, amounts to a betrayal not only of Jess herself but of sisterhood.

The characterization of Miss Jewsbury, the only adult lesbian in the work, raises an interesting point. Younger than the other church members, Miss Jewsbury supports Jess when the Pastor denounces her for "unnatural passions." This example of sisterhood in action does not, however, function to show lesbian networking in a positive light. While Jess accepts Miss Jewsbury's support at this point, in a later scene Jess sharply rejects her offer of friendship. Readers of the book might understand this rejection as deriving from Jess' sense of betrayal at having been seduced by Miss Jewsbury after the public denunciation. But this seduction does not occur in the television drama. Viewers might therefore find Jess' reaction to Miss Jewsbury somewhat mystifying.

We can explain it, however, by reference to the television text's calculated avoidance of anything that might confirm popular homophobic stereotypes. These would include the prejudiced assumption that homosexuals are sexually attracted to every member of their own sex, and that children are in danger of seduction by adult homosexuals. A woman-identified readership may well be able to accept that exploitative relations exist between women as between men and women, but a general audience would be less likely to read it in that neutral way. We assume that the television dramatization therefore omitted this seduction in order to prevent a reading in line with homophobic prejudices. It does, however, retain Jess' coldness towards Miss Jewsbury. As a result, the Mother's attempts to keep Jess away from her appear ironically pointless, since Miss Jewsbury clearly has no influence on Jess and offers her no role model. On the contrary, she is cast as foil to Jess' principled refusal to conceal her sexuality. Miss Jewsbury is a closet lesbian who defines her lesbianism as the "problem" of loving the "wrong people." Visually, this apologetic attitude is coded by her rather spinsterish dowdiness and stiff body language. Narratively, it is made clear that her temerity is not rewarded by acceptance by the faithful, who consider her "unholy."

Elsie, on the other hand, is both confidante and friend. Coded as a stereotypically batty but kind and wise old lady, Elsie is a woman-identified woman. She has been a suffragette, militant enough to have been imprisoned. She colludes in trying to protect Jess and Melanie from the wrath of the faithful, and she makes derogatory remarks about men (doctors are "men of knives"), including in a gentle way God himself. She is presumably a widow although a married past forms no part of her characterization. That she might also identify as a lesbian is a possible inference, but it is sufficient to see her as firmly located within what Adrienne Rich called the "lesbian continuum." (Rich, 1983, p. 192)

As a result, if all close friendships in the text are between women, this does not mean that all women are portrayed as automatically friends. More pointedly, it claims that not all lesbians are automatically friends, let alone lovers, and do not even necessarily relate to each other as fellow-lesbians. This effectively demonstrates a "lesbian continuum" among all women, but it evades any sense of the specificity of a shared lesbian identity. It does not represent a lesbian community, nor any of the choices lesbians may make in relation to appearance, body language or lifestyle. Presumably this evasion was deliberate, designed to convey the message that lesbianism and lesbians are "ordinary." However, the biographical form of ORANGES' fictional narrative, with its locus on the coming of age of an individual, might also emphasize an individualized perspective rather than that of a lesbian collectivity.

RADICAL REALISM

The single most important claim that the text makes in relation to lesbianism is that it is ordinary, a normal way for people to relate to each other. In short, the text "naturalizes" lesbianism. By this we do not mean that the text intervenes in the nature/ nurture debate. It does not discuss Jess' sexuality nor try to explain or justify it in terms of hormones, biography, or sexual politics. It does not, indeed, ever use the terms "lesbian" or "homosexual." This fictional narrative does not employ the strategy of a liberal text, which would engage in debate with the dominant ideology, taking its commonsense for granted, but seeking to modify or

question it, explaining its absences and contradictions, while defending alternatives. In relation to lesbianism, the film LIANA exemplifies such a strategy: The friends of the woman who leaves her husband for a relationship with a woman come to terms with her sexuality as "other," accepting her *despite* her lesbianism.

ORANGES does not work like this. Instead, it presents Jess' lesbianism as something that from her point of view, and therefore also from the viewer's, just is. What is considered natural in our culture is that which "just is" — that which is obviously the case, which needs no explaining or arguing for. A work of fiction never feels the need to explain, or argue for heterosexual relations. Where fiction shows conflict in relation to a heterosexual relationship it does not question why or whether men and women should fall in love with each other. Similarly, ORANGES does not discuss why Jess is in love with Melanie or whether she should be: Jess just is in love with Melanie. In this sense, Jess' lesbianism is naturalized just as heterosexuality is naturalized in most other texts.

The narrative conflict springs from the religious sect's hostility to Jess' sexuality. Central to the portrayal of this conflict between fundamentalism and lesbianism is the contrasting representation of each in terms of "normality." Both depart from what the dominant ideological formations of British culture define as "normal" sexuality and "normal" religion. Yet while Jess' lesbianism is portrayed as a moral norm for intimate relationships, the portrayal of the evangelical sect calls into question fundamentalism's values and practices. The narrative implicitly judges these against a morality assumed to be more humane and intelligent. Portraying the sect's persecution of Jess as unacceptable amounts to a rhetorical device. The text's problematic becomes not lesbianism, but fundamentalism, which is found wanting by the moral norms embodied in the character of Jess. This aims to persuade viewers that any persecution of homosexuality is not only morally unacceptable, but "abnormal."

This naturalization of lesbianism depends on its representation through realist conventions. Such conventions are more usually the medium for transmitting ideological norms. The text uses, if you like, an "illiberal" strategy, constructing the narrative conflict, characters and events in a way that would encourage a particular reading and exclude (or at least discourage) alternative readings. This is not a question of documentary truth, of transgressing against probability. We can assume that historical reality is always capable of excesses greater than those of fiction. Nor is it a question of "bias": All representation involves selectivity and perspective and therefore closure, including documentaries and nonrealist, "open" texts. As Winterson says of her script,

"I am lying to you, but I am also telling you the truth." (Winterson, 1990, p. viii)

Nor are the conventions of realism committed to what social conditions they represent as the "real." In its formal transformations, realism has a long history as the medium of radicalism, of challenges to dominant versions of reality. From Emile Zola to Robert Tressell, from Richard Wright to Alice Walker, from Bessie Head to Chinua Achebe, realism has been the novelistic medium for challenging capitalism, racism, sexism, colonialism. And from CATHY COME HOME to BOYS FROM THE BLACKSTUFF, British television drama has employed varieties of realism to challenge the status quo and establish a different worldview, a different

morality, as the basis of commonsense. ORANGES works in this tradition to establish a lesbian identity as the basis of its commonsense. In the context of contemporary Britain, this is a powerful claim to make.

We would maintain that, far from militating against the possibility of challenging dominant ideological positions, realism remains the dominant medium in our culture through which such challenge can be effective. The avant-garde in all its forms can outrage commonsense, can mock it, question it or turn it upside down. What it cannot do is establish a new commonsense. Only realism can do that. This is what the television version of ORANGES achieves in relation to lesbianism, and as realist television drama it functions as a more radical text, formally and socially, than the modernist novel from which it was adapted.

NOTES

A version of this article, "From String of Knots to Orange Box: Lesbianism on Prime Time" by Margaret Marshment and Julia Hallam, will be published in *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous. Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, edited by Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge. London: Pandora, forthcoming Fall 1994.

1.. While the pastor and Jess' mother do have names in the television version, they are almost never used. The published script identifies them as "Pastor" and "Mother" respectively. When referring to them as characters, we have adopted the capitalization but added the definite article to prevent a suggestion of mythicization. We do not capitalize when referring to their roles rather than to them as characters. The script identifies the seven-year-old Jess of the first episode as "Small Jess," We have followed this usage in order to distinguish the younger character from the "Jess" of the second and third episodes.

2. The Local Government Act, 1989, included the notorious Clause 28, which prohibited local councils in Britain from funding organizations and/or projects deemed to be "promoting homosexuality." Despite widespread protest from the gay community, this created a climate of fear concerning any activity which might possibly be covered by the Act. This did not include broadcasting, which is funded either by advertising or, as in the case of the BBC, by license fee. The quasi-governmental nature of the BBC, however, might have exposed it to criticism in this climate of fear.

3. While the production team for ORANGES did not consist entirely of women, the proportion of women in key decision-making roles was exceptionally high. That writer, director and producer were very conscious of the sexual politics of the venture is clear from interviews they have given. See, for example, MOVING PICTURES, BBC2, 1993.

4. Until relatively recently, "quality" drama has been the only television drama form to attract serious critical attention in Britain. Originally single plays by known dramatists, in the sixties and seventies series such as ARMCHAIR THEATER and PLAY FOR TODAY presented serious and provocative subject-matter that was often formally innovative. In recent years the term has more typically been used to describe a serial adaptation of a work of "literary" stature, characterized by "high production values." See, for example, the discussion by Brunsdon, 1990.

5. A summary of these debates is to be found in Terry Lovell's *Pictures of Reality*, 1980, especially Chapter 5. See also Raymond Tallis' *In Defense of Realism*, 1989, especially Chapters 2 and 4. Both Lovell and Tallis are skeptical of anti-realist arguments.

6. In tandem with our analysis of ORANGES, we conducted a series of close viewings of the text with a small sample of women. These viewers' responses to ORANGES inform many of our observations on the text's mechanisms of closure. That ORANGES was unlike "ordinary TV" was a frequently expressed opinion. Details of this research and our findings will be published in *Screen* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1995).

7. Alan Bleasdale's series BOYS FROM THE BLACKSTUFF (BBC2 1982) perhaps most closely resembles ORANGES in its incorporation of occasional non-realist elements within a realist base. Fay Weldon's THE LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE DEVIL (not, however, scripted by Weldon) departs further from its realist base, while Dennis Potter's THE SINGING DETECTIVE was more clearly identifiable as a modernist (or even postmodernist) text.

8. Tallis, p. 172, suggests that realism is only properly defined as such when it is well executed.

9. The women we viewed ORANGES with all expressed considerable pleasure both in what they themselves called its "high production values" and in its evident address to a female audience.

10. The women viewing ORANGES with its reacted with horror to the exorcism.

11. A point also made by Hinds, 1992, p. 164.

12. Responses to Small Jess by the women we viewed ORANGES with appeared to collapse actor and character. They found her both endearing and competent, and did appear to perceive the older Jess as the same person rather than as a separate performance.

13. All the women we viewed ORANGES with expressed very strong dislike of the Pastor, to the extent of appearing to forget that the character was the product of a performance.

14. "Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten...*Amor matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son?" James Joyce, 1971, p. 207.

15. The characterization of Katy makes no reference to any cultural aspects of her ethnic identity. This led more than one of the women we viewed ORANGES with to identify her as a "token Black" character.

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FILM CREDITS

BBC2. January 1990-Producer: Phillipa Giles.

Director: Beehan Kidron.

Script: Jeanette Winterson.

Designer: Cecilia Brereton. Music: Rachel Portman.

Costume Designer: Les Lansdown.

Cast: Geraldine McEwan (Mother), Charlotte Coleman (Jess), Emily Aston (Small Jess), Margery Withers (Elsie), Kenneth Cranham (Pastor), Celia Ionic (Miss Jewsbury), Cathryn Bradshaw (Melanie), Barbara Hicks (Cissy), Tania Rodrigues (Katy), Elizabeth Spriggs (May), Preda Dow (Mrs. Green), Pam Ferris (Mrs. Arkwright), Peter Gordon (William).

Rape and captivity

by Elliott Gruner

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In the very much B-quality action-adventure film, *SAVAGE JUSTICE*, a hostage explains her rape by saying, "I did what I had to do to survive." In popular culture, surviving rape or sexual assault is an essential trial which the female captive must face. Such moments of cinematic rape are so persistent that the rape of the female captive has become an assumption, an assumption that negates male responsibility for the crime since such a scene has come to be accepted as inevitable.

And, of course, the captive women in such films seldom learn anything worth telling. In contrast, the news media, popular lore, and often the military itself assume that captivity gives male POWs and hostages a privileged understanding of the enemy, God, the family, or self. The POW experience provides men with a degree of credibility and importance not afforded women. The cultural significance of captivity for men in the United States is so prevalent that it has become a cliché. Male POWs inhabit virtually every venue of popular and political culture. The most interesting recent examples of this phenomenon include the short, happy vice-presidential candidacy of former Vietnam POW James Stockdale and the POW flashbacks of the cartoon character Mr. Anderson on MTV's *Beavis and Butt-head*. Female captivity has popular and political appeal for much different reasons.

As the media treats it, captivity for a woman has a functional importance culturally, providing pornographic titillation, but a woman's insights have no epistemological value. Instead of being feted and pursued for endorsements like their male counterparts, real life female captives are often forgotten once their stories have been mined for explicitly sexual experiences. In the popular imagination captivity for a woman remains a problem of body, not of mind.

A whole cycle of films portrays the rape of the captive as imminent and necessary for women. Of course, this storyline follows a tradition in narrative and visual arts that began with the clash of Puritan and Native American cultures in early America. The stories of Mercy Short and others, which entertained Puritans in the 17th and 18th Centuries, demonized Native Americans. In the 19th Century the depiction of rape and sexual assault in women's captivity stories appealed directly to the reader's pornographic imagination. Rape in captivity stories of the frontier, the Barbary Coast, and slavery could entertain readers with the assault, torture, and rape of female captives in spite of otherwise strict censorship.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] In this context the stories' didactic and political value was a pretext

for absolving the voyeur from guilt as s/he thrilled to tales of sexual violence against women.

Today's film images of female captivity follow that line and assume that an emphasis on the sexual will have mass appeal. For example, women's prison films have always had their audience, but only so long as the lusty captive women wore clinging outfits and garish cosmetics. The home video markets of the 1980s exploited the women's prison theme, a theme no stranger to cinema, with a new cycle of action/ adventure films. These prison films always focus on the woman's body and her sexual agony under the guise of concern for moral and social injustice.

The ongoing debate on women entering combat includes a concern about what might happen to women in captivity. The assumption is that such women would be raped. Hollywood female captivity films help promote such an assumption and, therefore, seldom do without the subplot of rape or physical molestation. This is the case in films like *FIRST YANK INTO TOKYO* (1945), *THE SECRET OF BLOOD ISLAND* (1952), *FIVE GATES TO HELL* (1959), *SEVEN WOMEN FROM HELL* (1962), *BRUSHFIRE* (1961), *OPPOSING FORCE* (1986), *INTIMATE STRANGERS* (1986), *WOMEN OF VALOR* (1986), and *SAVAGE JUSTICE* (1987). Films like *SAVAGE JUSTICE* foreground the rape of the protagonist as a pretext for a revenge plot, either carried out by the woman herself or by some male hero. Sarah Howard's line (Julia Montgomery) in *SAVAGE JUSTICE*, "I did what I had to do to survive," has become a cliché.

In addition, the female protagonist in such films must always apologize for the rape. This is one of the tactics of inversion incorporated into the motif, so that responsibility seems to fall on the female victim. The very inevitability of the scene negates both individual and more generalized male responsibility for sexual aggression against women. This inversion occurs for the viewers' pleasure: Rape can be enjoyed more fully if the narrative sets up ruses to absolve the voyeur of guilt.

Another such ruse is the fact that the rape, so prominently referred to, is almost always elliptically photographed. These narrative cinematic strategies have a powerful ideological effect. Rape of female captives becomes a mythic taboo both to transgress for entertainment and to invoke for policy. As with earlier captivity stories that had an equal efficacy, the filmic presentation of rape, due to censorship codes, often avoids direct portrayal and thus saves audiences from having to deal with the true violence of the sexual act involved. This is especially the case in films about female prisoners of war, hostages, and other captives, whose imprisonment was not due to sexual abduction. In this way, woman's captivity has become sexualized.

Shots of perpetrator and victim in rape scenes most often focus on the face of the victim and shadow other characters involved. The visuals almost always appear from the point of view of the aggressor/ rapist, a perspective which supports the audience's covert identification with the attacker. The angle is seldom reversed to show what the victim sees. In narrative terms, the attacker is often a non-character. Such conventions indicate a troubling aversion to developing visually or identifying the attacker(s) in any coherent way.

Finally, films often narratively elide the actual rape scene or use such low contrast shots that it is impossible to tell what is happening except for a careful view of the victim's body and reactions. Although such tactics may keep a marketable rating for the film, this elliptical presentation occludes presenting the most damaging physical aspects of rape and retards audience apprehension of the crime's seriousness. Audiences must use their own imaginations and fantasies to supplement what is elided or shadowed. Consequently, the rape narrative enables audiences to enjoy a suggestion, a fantasy of sexual intercourse.

Such techniques of framing and editing allow acts of rape and molestation to slide more freely from crime to sex, from terror to pleasure. Indeed, although horror and terror are accepted as entertainment, the rape of the captive film motif comes to us within films that otherwise evince social concern. Rape in these films most often excites not at the level of abject fear or simple terror, but within an ensemble of sexually exploitive markers. The female captive is presented visually in an explicitly provocative way, exposing skin and other bodily features in a foreplay of images to excite the audience and foreshadow the rape.

According to the prologue, *WOMEN OF VALOR* (1987) attempts "to represent the collective courage and the experiences" of nurses captured by the Japanese in the Philippines. The film follows four nurses' experiences before and during captivity on the island of Luzon. Shortly after their capture, the film shows the nurses sleeping on the ground beside the road. Low-contrast images show shadows passing in front of and attacking the women. The senior nurse, Lieutenant Margaret Jessup (Susan Sarandon), wakes up and struggles only to be struck and knocked out cold. Another nurse, Helen, awakes but does not fight. We see her pleading with her assailants, "Please don't," while they unbutton her blouse, exposing her white bra. The film immediately cuts to the day after when the women briefly discuss the rape.

Both attack scenes emphasize the women's carefully illuminated upper torso and faces. The attackers appear only as shadows, groping hands, and the bright flash of a knife blade. We cannot see if the attackers are Japanese soldiers, although narratively we assume they are. The visual style and editing of this sequence imply that who raped the nurses or what the details of the assault were are not so important as the reactions of the women and the fact that they, as POWs, are raped.

Significantly, the two rape scenes are "unremarkable" in the context of the film. The rape hardly bears the connotation of a violent crime, *WOMEN OF VALOR* treats the rape so topically that it seems to be something that simply must be gotten out of the way before the female captivity plot can proceed. It is something that must happen. Such a cinematic logic makes it seem like female captives "have to" accept rape as a logical part of captivity.

WOMEN OF VALOR aired as part of "women you don't want to mess around with week" on Lifetime when *THELMA AND LOUISE* was showing in theaters around the country. The female announcer said the film "stars Susan Sarandon, and you know what she's capable of doing." The network highlighted the tough woman theme of the movie. Casting Susan Sarandon as Lieutenant Jessup reinforced the movie character's role as a tough woman fighting for justice.

Thus, Sarandon had to appear fighting until receiving the honorable knockout punch and raped only while she was unconscious. In contrast, her companion Helen, who does not resist, remains conscious during her rape, her apparent punishment for not fighting. Consequently, Helen becomes pregnant and has trouble recovering psychologically while the Sarandon character grows stronger from her initiatory experience.

Another troubling aspect of *WOMEN OF VALOR* is how the nurses are depicted before captivity. Although they were all nurses working in military hospitals before the war, the peacetime segment shows them doing nothing productive or professional. The first pre-war scene highlights the women's domesticity and shows them having a wedding shower for Helen at a country club.

Lieutenant Jessup gives Helen a black negligee and makes a joke about Helen's virginity, a joke that uncannily foreshadows both the death of Helen's husband-to-be and her rape by the Japanese. Other early sequences include the women talking in the staff lounge at a hospital, conversing in their pajamas in the barracks, bathing in a tropical pool, and listening to a radio around a campfire.

The film consistently portrays these women as naive and frivolous before their capture. That tone is underscored by a male lieutenant's comment as he looks at the women swimming in a jungle pool shortly after the war starts: "Get a load of them. You'd think they were on a picnic!" This cinematic prologue to depicting the difficult life of captivity emphasizes that the film will show the lessons learned through and hardships of being a POW. But it does so at the expense of taking seriously women's roles in the military. These initial sequences deny the "valor" and valuable contributions of women in the military, which the film is nominally dedicated to.

These sequences also mirror the prologue of women's captivity stories dating back to the colonies. For example, in his religious appropriation of captivity tales, Cotton Mather highlighted white women's initial naïveté and domestic bliss before capture by the Indians so as to emphasize the brutality of their capture, establish the demonic qualities of Native American raiders, and deepen the irony of the stories.

INTIMATE STRANGERS, one of the few movies that depicts a female POW of the Vietnam War, uses in its narrative structure Nurse Sally Bearson's (Terri Garr) rape as a suspenseful secret. This film focuses on a female POW/MIA's troubled repatriation. This focus is remarkable because it leaves the sensational POW/MIA issue as an unexplored subplot unlike hundreds of other POW/MIA plots propagated in U.S. culture. Instead, this television movie foregrounds the Bearsons' troubled marriage and depicts Sally Bearson's rape at the expense of dealing with anything else from her ten year captivity. The movie implies that a woman POW's successful return to domestic life overshadows all else. *INTIMATE STRANGERS* slights Bearson's captivity experience in much the same way that U.S. culture has forgotten actual women's captivity experiences. For example, few Americans remember actual women captured in Vietnam such as Kate Webb, Michele Ray, or Monika Schwinn.

The film reduces Bearson's remarkable captivity experience to a series of flashbacks to the night she was raped. This is particularly interesting and troubling since *INTIMATE STRANGERS* is one of the few films that attempts to portray,

however erroneously, a U.S. woman who was captured during the Vietnam War.

The shots in this film are remarkably similar to those in *WOMEN OF VALOR* (filmed at roughly the same time as *INTIMATE STRANGERS*), The rape sequence, sprinkled in suspenseful clips throughout the film, tracks the approach of the rapist to a cage where Bearson is tied face up, arms outstretched on the bamboo floor.

The rape itself is really only foreshadowed. We see a carefully framed shot of the Bearson's well-illuminated upper torso and face just before the assailant penetrates the her. The sequence is shot almost exclusively from the rapist's point of view. In this way, *INTIMATE STRANGERS* encourages the audience to both imagine and enjoy the rape from the male/ dominant point of view. As in *WOMEN OF VALOR*, the violence of the act itself and the character of the criminal are left to the audience's imagination. The manner of depicting the rape, silhouetting the identity of the rapist and assuming the rapist's point of view, conspire to create a momentary identification with the rapist.

And, like Helen in *WOMEN OF VALOR*, Bearson must pay for her rape by becoming pregnant and giving birth in captivity. The denouement includes Sally's painful revelation that she was raped and that her seven-year-old refugee companion is, in fact, her son (fathered by one of her captors).

The final scene of the film shows Sally begging her husband, Jeff (Stacy Keach), to make love to her. Sally spends the entire film struggling to earn Jeff's forgiveness. Sally Bearson is, therefore, three times a victim: first of imprisonment, then of sexual assault in captivity, and finally of Jeff's neglect. Ironically Jeff's sexual relation and love affair with another woman (played by Cathy Lee Crosby) requires no apology or explanation. While Sally must suffer and apologize to redeem her tarnished image in the wake of her captivity and rape, affluent Jeff has affirmed his manhood and sensitivity by belatedly forgiving Sally and accepting her son. Such representations subordinate feminine POW captivity to the experiences and approval of the house-husband, the stay-at-home male.

This plot structure uses an explicit inversion and perversion of male POW tales from Vietnam. In those films, the trials of the always, everywhere celibate mate protagonist is juxtaposed against continuous temptations of the stay-at-home wife. From the beginning, the POW film and the vast majority of POW stories have looked warily at the POW wife's faithfulness. The stories carefully survive the wife's capacity to execute her self-imposed celibacy.

INTIMATE STRANGERS implies that captivity for a woman POW is not an experience that empowers or enlightens. Unlike male POWs, who are typically shown learning and benefiting from their trials, women must struggle first to reveal and then to apologize and compensate for their own captivity.

OPPOSING FORCE does have Air Force Lieutenant Cathy Casey (Lisa Eichhorn) learn from her ordeal, but only after one of her captors assaults her. This plot follows a female military pilot into a POW training camp where previously only male pilots were allowed. The training scenario turns all too real when the deluded cadre find that they must do away with their trainees to cover for the murder of a male captive and the camp commander's rape of the female pilot. It is in this plotline that the camp's commander, CPT Becker (Anthony Zerbe), tells Casey that

he will assault her in order to prepare her for what the enemy will do. Up to that point, Casey remains passive and detached from the events in camp. When a male pilot rescues her from the evil CPT Becker, she becomes aggressive. During the remainder of the film she battles the camp cadre along with the men.

Becker rapes Casey during a mock interrogation. He explains the reason for what he is about to do and pushes Casey to the ground. Despite Casey's size and conditioning (she is as tall as and perhaps as heavy as Becker) she is not able to resist Becker and falls quickly onto her back on the bamboo floor. Unlike the shadowy attackers in other films, the assailant in this film is obvious to the audience, but the camera's point of view is still from the side of or above Casey's prostrate upper body. The camera focuses on the victim's reactions making the viewer's perspective consistent with that of a sadomasochistic voyeur or the perpetrator himself.

Ironically, in the context of the film, the assault on Casey really does seem to do what the camp commander said it would: the female pilot learns from the episode. She seems enabled to assume an aggressive pattern of behavior after she is sexually assaulted. Narratively, she cannot become a hero, taking charge of her own destiny until her powers of action are activated through rape.

Brian DePalma's *CASUALTIES OF WAR* is sensitive to the rape of the Vietnamese woman, Oahn (Thuy Thule), but however sympathetic the plot may appear, the soldiers' gangrape of Oahn narratively functions as just one episode in the maturation of yet another male-soldier protagonist. *CASUALTIES OF WAR* follows a U.S. soldier to Vietnam where he joins a squad of infantry who kidnap, rape, and eventually murder a Vietnamese woman for "R and R." The rape scene is central to the plot and does identify the perpetrators and their ambivalence toward the inhumanity of their crime.

The rape sequence in this film stays at the voyeur's perspective as low or skewed angle shots follow the male protagonist's viewpoint. However sympathetic the film might seem toward the Vietnamese woman, the visual images remain complicit with the criminals. At no time does the visual perspective shift to that of the victim. Nor does the audience see the most brutal session of abuse; one character later explains how another character held a knife (a weapon later used to murder the victim) to the woman's throat during the rape.

In fact, the oblique, voyeuristic shots of the rape scene are quite consistent with the overall perspective of the narrative. Oahn's captivity and murder give Eriksson (Michael J. Fox), the male protagonist, the luxury of working out his moral discriminations. The film ends back in the United States where Eriksson mistakes a woman on a bus for Oahn, the woman his squad raped. The final sequence shows the character and the audience that justice has been done and order restored: Other attractive Asian women have survived to live happy lives in the United States.

The script's final lines make this conclusion explicit. The woman on the bus asks Eriksson, "You had a bad dream didn't you?" Eriksson answers, "Yes." The woman responds, "It's over now, I think." However repentant Eriksson might feel, his maturation has come at the expense of the female rape victim. As one of my colleagues, Cathy Haight, has pointed out, any atrocity he committed or saw might

have served the same moral function. Whatever atrocity the U.S. soldiers committed, by the end of the film the male hero can dismiss it as merely a "bad dream." De Palma's ultimate ambivalence toward the crime of rape becomes clear when he takes as his major theme the men's redemption.

THE SECRET OF BLOOD ISLAND (aka P.O.W.) extended the horror production skills of Hammer Studios to portray a World War II Japanese POW camp in Malaya. In this film a female pilot crashes in Japanese-held territory. Disguised as a man, she attempts to hide out in a POW camp. The Japanese eventually discover the ruse and bring her to a reckoning with the camp commandant. We hear the woman's screams as the camera pans over a darkened prison camp. Then there is a cut to various reaction shots of male POWs and their speculation about how the Japanese are assaulting the woman. Two of these images are remarkable.

In the first a badly disfigured POW (who has a particular fear of the woman) grabs a secret cache of hand grenades so he can "put that bitch out other misery." The implication is it would be better for the woman to be dead than to survive rape. Even worse, the episode implies that a woman must die just because the male POWs cannot put up with her screams.

Toward the end of the sequence the senior POW goes to the Japanese camp commander's office to protest the assault. The Japanese cadre greet the POW in disheveled uniforms, drinks and cigarettes in hand while the deep focus shows other soldiers in the next room silhouetted against the shaded window and hovering over what must be the woman POW. This rape sequence titillates the imagination of both the POWs in the film and audience. One POW says blandly, "Can you imagine what they're doing to her in there?" By showing that the POWs imagine the violent sexual assault on the woman, the film magnifies the importance of the scene and unashamedly pricks the imagination of the audience while avoiding the problematic of depicting the actual rape.

The scene also reinforces the racist portrayal of the Japanese in the film. As Susan Jeffords has pointed out, rape in such films "becomes less of a 'crime' in and of itself than a justification for the characterization of the villain." [2]

After a night of torture, male POWs rescue the woman and help her escape. Several of the men die in the ensuing battle with the Japanese. The film's lessons are quite clear. First, women in captivity will necessarily be raped. Second, women captives so disrupt the fragile community of male POWs that even one might put a whole population of men risk. The overarching assumption is that all men of "honor" cannot rest until the woman is safe. As one POW exclaims while listening to the woman's screams: "Oh God! We can't just sit."

The woman who elicits such heroic efforts on the part of male POWs, nevertheless causes the death of some POWs and jeopardizes the survival of the rest. Such a plot line perpetuates the notion that only an all-male military can effectively function in war. According to such logic, presumably the woman should never have been there in the first place.

In film rape, the referent, the crime of rape itself, is of less cinematic interest than depicting the force of male desire. A recent case in California makes this explicit. A woman who was raped by an as yet unapprehended man told her story to the

writers of the television series TOP COPS. She is now suing the show because in TOP COPS' reenactment, supposedly produced to help catch the perpetrator, a buxom blonde actress who looks and acts much differently than the victim plays the victim's role: She actually flirts with the man before the crime occurs. The real-life victim claims that this distortion was gratuitous and misrepresented her role in the actual event, making her appear complicit in the crime itself.

At this point I must explain that depicting man-on-man rape is taboo in most POW and hostage films. With notable exceptions such as MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. LAWRENCE and THE RED SPIDER, films never even allude to rapes of male POWs, even though the preponderance of POW stories involve an almost exclusively male cast. When rape of men is represented, films show it differently than when the subjects are female. Most certainly male POWs as well as women have been molested or raped in captivity. But the overwhelming impression of narratives from male POWs or representations of male captivity is that captivity is somehow asexual for the male and explicitly sexual for the female. The main event of female captivity stories continues to be the sexual violation of the captive, in many ways rape completes the plot of female captivity. Female captivity in film not only thrills viewers but also asserts a conservative, successful, and containing vision of male power. In film the female captive must be dominated and be raped. And afterwards we can expect to see the victim take responsibility: "I" did what I had to do.

The experience of real-life, ex-Gulf War POW Rhonda Cornum demonstrates how biased the presentation of rape has become. More than a year after the Gulf War, before a Presidential commission on women in the military, Cornum revealed the details of her POW experience. *The New York Times* reported that members of the panel were "stunned" by her testimony, which included descriptions of mistreatment and "indecent assaults" by her captors. Cornum had not revealed these events prior to that date.

The timing of this revelation remains suspect. Cornum's testimony came not in post-captivity news conferences or Pentagon reports on the conduct of the war, but in the context of hearings on women in the Armed Forces where her tales of sexual abuse and mistreatment could be interpreted as evidence for limiting combat roles for women. That's exactly the agenda Cornum herself was working against. The article which detailed her testimony mentioned in the next-to-last paragraph Cornum's fears:

"Major Cornum expressed concern that her mistreatment had been blown out of proportion and would be used by those who want to keep women out of combat."

Cornum's testimony before the commission and her book, *She Went to War: The Rhonda Cornum Story*, have not been used by the media or the government to make her a hero but instead to foreground the tragedy of women serving on the front lines. Immediately after the war Commit did not make the "Yellow Ribbon" issue of *People Magazine* for Gulf War heroes, but a year later her testimony of sexual assault merited a two-page story in the same magazine. Cornum's painful experiences as captive were reduced and appropriated for their usefulness in a national political debate a year after her captivity. Her story was not used as evidence of a crime or to make her a spokesperson on the issues male ex-captives are invited to speak about. This political dynamic mirrors and stems from the same

patriarchal ideology as the presentation of rape in cinema.

We might also examine when and how the press believes women's testimony of sexual abuse and harassment. When women from the Gulf War have come forward with allegations of being abused by friendly soldiers or when they claim molestation at a fraternal event like that of the Tailhook Association, the media treats the issue much differently than it treats cases of women who might claim being sexually abused by an enemy, particularly a racially different enemy. In many ways, the film rape prepares us for and leads us to expect the abuse of women in enemy captivity, while films seldom portray U.S. "Top Guns" who gang rape or a "Major Dad" who commits incest. Cornum's testimony about captivity fits a well-known and sought-after pattern while Anita Hill's was politically troublesome.

Rape in captivity is a part of a meta-narrative that not only attempts to represent behavior but also actually motivates it.[3] A 1992 *Newsweek* cover story reported that many soldiers in former Yugoslavia consider rape a virtual duty, a part of a war narrative that has to be acted out before a successful victory/ conclusion can be had.[4] President Bush used the rape theme to justify the invasion of Panama and the Gulf War.[5] Rape has become a part of war that Clausewitz might have described as "war conducted by other means."

Women in wartime and in military culture provide a ready test for male dominance and a ready target of anger: Women become the object of male violence just for being there. They violate the male terrain of war and fraternity of power. Tailhook is an excellent example of male terrain, where the women "had to" have it happen. Scenes in the media depicting assaults on female captives consistently deemphasize the criminal aspect of male violence in order to make more acceptable and exciting entertainment. The assumption of and presentation of rape in captivity films promotes a cultural logic that rationalizes the sexual attack on women in captivity and corrupts history.

NOTES

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

1. For a compelling engagement of this history see, among other texts, James H. Lewis, "Images of Captive Rape in the Nineteenth Century, *Journal of American Culture* 15:2 (Summer 1992): 69-77.
2. Susan Jeffords, "Rape and the New World Order," *Cultural Critique*, 19 (Fall 1991): 212
3. Ronald Dworkin has recently claimed that media and, in particular, pornography do not motivate sexual assault. He has specifically refuted suggestions by Catherine R. MacKinnon that rapes in Bosnia were somehow motivated by the proliferation of pornographic material by citing George Kennan's claim that "rape was also 'ubiquitous' in the Balkan wars of 1913, well before any 'saturation' by pornography had begun." Unfortunately, such arguments beg the question and avoid the central contention that sexual violence is a trait of masculine dominated society that sanitizes, endorses, and propagates such crimes through many different forms of

media including cinema. See "Women and Pornography," *The New York Review of Books*, 12 Oct. 1993: 38.

4. For a more detailed account of the 'mass psychology of rape' and 'man's attitude toward rape in war' see Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

5. The day before the invasion, President Bush claimed that Panamanian forces had assaulted an U.S. woman and that the United States could not tolerate such conduct. The "tape of Kuwait" became the controlling metaphor for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. See Susan Jeffords, "Rape and the New World Order."

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U.S. Latinos and the media: theory and practice

by Chon A. Noriega, Guest Editor

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In the articles in the two special sections on "U.S. Latinos and the Media,"[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] the approach to Latino representation and self-representation has focused on "speaking" in the broadest sense of the term. Who gets to speak — that is, to make films? What are the thematic, generic, and ideological characteristics of Hollywood films about Latinos? How have social conditions and production constraints determined the types of films Latinos have made? What strategies might allow Latino filmmakers to both enter and subvert the system? And what do filmmakers themselves have to say about their work and its contexts?

The general assumption is that Latinos have been excluded from the film and television industries. As such, one can posit something called the "Latino media arts," "Latino cinema," or "Latino film and video" as a discrete category that exists, for the most part, outside these industries. But if such a category is first constituted on the basis of exclusion, most analyses (including my own research) attempt to substantiate it on the basis of a coordinated or coherent opposition to "Hollywood" and as a sphere of cinematic practice with pre-existing cultural, aesthetic, or ideological affinities — albeit multiple and shifting ones. In other words, exclusion remains an assumption, an abstract or undifferentiated catalyst for Latino film and filmmakers, rather than a concurrent object of historical inquiry.

Even so, the assumption of Latino exclusion is by and large an accurate one, although — as a number of the articles in the last issue reveal — a few Latino filmmakers have been able to reach the "mainstream." In their careful delineation of the "subversive strategies" used in Latino narratives, scholars such as Kathleen Newman, Carmen Huaco-Nuzum, and Charles Ramírez Berg begin to suggest the political contours or "social space" of the industry itself. What is at stake is access to the "mainstream," defined here as those industries which produce and/or circulate the discourse of an "imagined community."

But while these scholars argue that the "mainstream" can be subverted by Latino filmmakers, they also acknowledge, in quite different ways, that the "mainstream" (in its industrial configuration and practices) also structures the discourse that it circulates. In other words, it is not just an issue of introducing new content into a

value-free communications system, but of minorities entering into the exclusive social space that produces and sustains the "mainstream." In the former approach, one could ostensibly gain access by learning a "formula" or making an economic or demographic argument for more diverse programming. The assumption was that one could step directly from theory to practice, or, in Henri Lefebvre's terms, from "mental space" to "social space." The latter approach is political.

What these articles point to is a need to examine the social structure of racial exclusion (in its legal, political, and economic dimensions), rather than its quantitative fact. In the end, that structure may have more coherence, and may represent a more effective site of intervention, than an ideological analysis that limits itself to Hollywood narratives. But if that is so, how can scholarship which touches upon pressing social issues lead to effective change within the industry? In fact, should it even try? There is no easy answer, although it is an important question to ask along the way, so that the relationship between theory and practice is more direct, rather than one of cooptation into the processes of institutional racism.

The previous special section on "U.S. Latinos and the Media" (JUMP CUT 38) included overviews of alternative Latino cinemas and media groups, close readings of recent Chicano feature-length dramas that circulated within and subverted mainstream distribution channels, and a practitioner-oriented approach for Latino screenwriters who intend to work within the Hollywood paradigm. In this special section, the essays fall into three categories:

READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Several scholars provide alternative readings of "classical" Hollywood films, revealing the ways in which an identity politics has been constructed around these texts. Alberto Sandoval articulates a "Puerto Rican" reading of *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961) that has long circulated within the Puerto Rican community, a reading that stands in opposition to (and is obscured by) the film's ostensibly liberal notion of "America." Included, also, is a cluster of poems from Tine Villanueva's unpublished collection, *Scene from the Movie GIANT*, which traces the author's coining to consciousness to the film's penultimate scene.[2] in "Pato Donald's Gender Ducking," José Piedra explores the confusion of gender and sexual identity in the political discourse on Latin America, examining the Disney animated paean to the Good Neighbor Policy, *THE THREE CABALLEROS* (1945). In counterpoint to the above essays, Christopher Ortiz examines the problematic representation of "race" within the "other" Hollywood, the subculture or alternative industry of gay pornography.

ARTISTS' STATEMENTS AND INTERVIEWS

Harry Gamboa, Jr., and Willie Varela discuss their recent work in the context of careers that began in the Chicano Movement of the early 1970s. Gamboa, a Los Angeles writer, conceptual artist and photographer, co-founded the Chicano art collective Asco (1972-1987), turning to video in the mid-1980s. I have reprinted the "No-Movie Interview" by Gamboa and Gronk, which reveals the centrality of the cinema and a "politics of representation" in Asco's performances and public art, as well as the individual works of Asco members (also, Patssi Valdez and Willie Heron). Willie Varela, a photographer and Super-8 filmmaker living in El Paso,

situates his work within seemingly opposing movements: the auteur-orientation of New American Cinema and the social orientation of the Chicano Art Movement. Since 1992, Varela has also worked in High-8 video, producing his first narrative, *A LOST MAN* (1992), and an ongoing series called *Border Witness Tapes*. In her interview with video pioneer Edin Velez, Lillian Jimenez explores his complex body of work as it intersects with the video art world and efforts to define and support Latino media production. Finally, in "Pocha Manifesto #1," Sandra Peña-Sarmiento reclaims and redefines the Mexican derogation *pocha* as the socio-aesthetic principle for a new generation of Chicana filmmakers, artists and writers. Interestingly, at about the same time that Peña-Sarmiento started producing video art under the banner of Pocha Productions, Chicano Secret Service, a comedy group comprised of three recent UC-Berkeley graduates, began to self-publish *Pocho Magazine*, an irreverent send up of both Chicano and mainstream cultures. In 1993, the group conducted an elaborate media hoax, promoting a State of the Pocho (STOP) Summit hosted by the National Pochismo Institute (NPI). The announcement appeared in *Hispanic Magazine*, among other places.[3] In her manifesto, Peña-Sarmiento identifies the cultural and gender biases that operate within both the Chicano community and the national culture.

THE NUMBERS GAME

In the final essay, I reflect on my own experiences testifying before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. I provide a summary of my presentation, inflected with occasional hindsight, before considering the broader implications of the hearings and of the strategies available to the scholars and advocates who testified. This article is at best a provisional statement that embodies some of the contradictions I have encountered as my research leads me into the gap between theory and practice.

NOTES

1. My contribution as guest editor was made possible through research support and faculty development grants from the following sources: Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, University of New Mexico; Department of Film and Television and Office of the Chancellor, University of California, Los Angeles; and the American Council of Learned Societies.
2. Tino Villanueva, *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1993).
3. For more information, contact Chicano Secret Service, P.O. Box 63052, Los Angeles, CA 90063.

West Side Story A Puerto Rican reading of "America"

by Alberto Sandoval Sanchez

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"My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

To my nephew and niece in the U.S.A.,

Laura and Vladimir Estrada Sandoval

After my immigration to Wisconsin in 1973 to attend college, the musical film WEST SIDE STORY frequently was imposed upon me as a "model of of/for" my Puerto Rican ethnic identity. Certainly it was a strange and foreign model for a newcomer, but not for the Anglo-Americans who actualize with my bodily presence their stereotypes of Latinos' Otherness. Over and over again, to make me feel comfortable in their family rooms and to tell me of their knowledge about Puerto Ricans, they would start their conversations with WEST SIDE STORY: "Al, we loved WEST SIDE STORY." "Have you seen the movie?" "Did you like it?" On other occasions, some people even sang parodically in my ears: "Alberto, I've just met a guy named Alberto." And, how can I forget those who upon my arrival would start tapping flamenco steps and squealing: "I like to be in America!...Everything free in America." [1][[open notes in new window](#)] As the years passed by I grew accustomed to their actions and reactions to my presence. I would smile and ignore the stereotype of Puerto Ricans that Hollywood promotes. Or perhaps, was I unwilling to identify with the Puerto Rican immigrants living in New York because of my own prejudices of class or race?

As it happened I moved to New York City in 1983, to the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen which borders the area where the film takes place, better known today as Lincoln Center. I lived in the neighborhood for eight months with the New York Puerto Ricans. Given that at the time I became acquainted with New York territories and shared daily the socio-economic reality of Puerto Rican immigrants, I became interested in correlating and contrasting the film with the historical reality of the immigrants. At that time I had the opportunity to see the movie, which was shown at the Hollywood Theater on Eighth Avenue, between 47th and 48th Streets.

My interest on decentering, demythifying, and deconstructing ethnic, social, and racial stereotypes of Latinos inscribed in the musical film was the result of witnessing the reaction of an Anglo-American audience that applauded euphorically after the number "America." Only then did I understand the power and vitality of the musical, not just as pure entertainment, but as an iconic ideological articulation of the stereotype and identity of Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S.A. as well as for all other Latino immigrants. I also realized at the same time that in the musical number "America" there is a political campaign in favor of assimilation. Such assimilation is pronounced by a Puerto Rican herself, Rita Moreno, whose acting was awarded with the coveted Oscar Award.

On the other hand, the audience's reception, which was manipulated by a patriotic discourse generated and transmitted through the song, led me to question and problematize up to what point the musical configures, produces, and re-produces a racist discourse of Latinos' Otherness in the U.S.A. How does the musical film project ethnic difference as a threat to the national, territorial, racial, and linguistic identity as well as to the national and imperial subjectivity of the Anglo-Americans?

From such a questioning posture, we should examine how the musical film through its music, its dances, its romantic melodrama, and its exoticism of cultural Otherness distracts from the racism in it. How does it attract, interpellate, and position ideologically the perceiving spectator — whose social construction of reality and racial differences belong to the U.S.A. — by spatially dividing the Puerto Ricans from the Anglo-Americans, Puerto Rico from the U.S.A., the West Side from the East Side, the Latino race from the Anglo-Saxon race, the Puerto Rican cultural reality from the Anglo-American one, the poor from the rich. These binary oppositions produce a political, patriotic, and mythifying discourse in which the Puerto Ricans confront the Anglo-American power as intruders in and invaders of their territory: the U.S.A.

WEST SIDE STORY depicts a fight for urban space, a space that has already been impregnated with cultural symbols and political significations for the relations, interactions, and social actions according to the "American Way of Life." In this sense, the film projects how the Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 40s and 50s not only usurps the order and the semiotic spatial organization of the Anglo-Americans, but how it also constitutes a threat for the assumed coherent and monolithic identity of the Anglo-American subject. I am interested in highlighting how the Puerto Rican immigration, from the margins of the ghetto, threatens to disarticulate, according to the Anglo-Americans, their socio-political system at the capitalist center of New York City.

For those who know Manhattan, the city is divided territorially, economically, racially, and ethnically. Each socio-economic group inhabits a space concretely demarcated, and even neighborhood border crossings are avoided. Specifically it has been the film WEST SIDE STORY (1961, but staged on Broadway in 1957) that has contributed to perpetuating the image of the West Side as a site of urban, ethnic, and racial problems.

The plot of the musical film is about the hostility, hatred, and confrontations

between two gangs. As the action develops, those gangs ("the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called 'American'" [137]) reveal not a mere struggle for territory but rather a socio-economic and racial confrontation. Although the Jets constitute "an anthology of the Americans," that gang consists solely of children of white European immigrants, Their actions and values already consolidate the ideological apparatus of the Anglo-American political national subjectivity, that is, the ideological program and behavior of the "All-American Boy."

Although they belong to the working class, obviously the Jets' members act according to the values, attitudes, beliefs, and ideals of the Anglo-American national subjectivity. They have an ideological and political consciousness of their nationality and imperial superiority, as shown by their competitive spirit to be "Number One." For this reason, they emblemize the ideology of the "All-American Boy," a totally white identity which does not make room for any other racial groups in the gang. In this way, the Jets define themselves in the first song, "Jet Song," in terms of their own socio-political and personal superiority, confidence, and arrogance:

"I want the Jets to be Number One, to sail, to hold the sky!
We're Jets! The greatest!"

It should be pointed out that blacks have no representation or participation in this "anthology." Is it because they had already been confined to their own space in Harlem? Hence the Anglo-American power confrontation is limited to the recently migrated racial minority group, the Puerto Ricans.

In its historical specificity, the space of the West Side obtains its total meaning only by reading its "not-said" space — that is, the upper East Side, present because of its topographical contiguity. The upper East Side stands as the center of Anglo-American white power, for the upper bourgeois class resides there. At the same time, the action in the West Side is referred to as a "story." In this way the title silences the dynamic, processual, and dialectical concept of history. It postulates a binary opposition marked by the presence and absence of economic, ethnic, and racial differences: West/ East; Story/ History; Jets/ Sharks; White Anglo-Americans/ Spics. In the above terms the title WEST SIDE STORY expresses a merely superficial structure at the level of its enunciation — a story of love. However, when the title is read in metonymical relation to the center of power, an absent structure is registered under the textual surface of the story of love. That is, the film has as its deep structure an explicit discourse of discrimination and racial prejudices towards immigrant Latinos.

From a questioning perspective, I propose to examine how the East Side's absence — a geo-political absence signaled metonymically in the title — becomes present. It displaces and decenters the story of Maria and Tony's love in the West Side. Indeed, my alternative reading, by centering on the absent action on the East Side, concentrates on the ideological production of a political and racist discourse, which could be entitled "East Side History of Hatred/ Racism." With this title I name the ideological discourse of the deep structures of the text. By so doing, I decenter the melodramatic and romantic title of WEST SIDE STORY.

My alternative reading based on the binary opposition between West Side and East

Side is more fully understood by considering that in 1949 the play's original title was to be *East Side Story*. The play was supposed to take place in the Lower East Side as a love story between a Jewish girl and an Italian Catholic boy. However, with Puerto Rican immigration, the idea became dated. As a result the team of writers and producers would even consider Chicano gangs in their search for some exoticism and "color." As Arthur Laurents has stated:

"My reaction was, it was *Abie's Irish Rose*, and that's why we didn't go ahead with it...Then by some coincidence, Lenny and I were at the Beverly Hills pool, and Lenny said: 'What about doing it about the Chicanos?' In New York we had the Puerto Ricans, and at that time the papers were full of stories about juvenile delinquents and gangs. We got really excited and phoned Jerry, and that started the whole thing." [2]

Bernstein was really inspired by the Chicano gangs:

"...and while we were talking, we noticed the *L.A. Times* had a headline of gang fights breaking out. And this was in Los Angeles with Mexicans fighting so-called Americans. Arthur and I looked at one another and all I can say is that there are moments which are right for certain things and that moment seemed to have come." [3]

Laurents also seems to have made the following comment:

"I suggested the blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York because this was the time of the appearance there of teenage gangs, and the problem of juvenile delinquency was very much in the news. It started to work." [4]

Although the team was clearly interested in juvenile delinquency, it is interesting to observe how ethnic and racial minorities replaced each other. The writers moved comfortably from Jews and Italians to Chicanos to blacks to Puerto Ricans. They were just searching for a confrontation between peoples of color and caucasian Anglo-Americans. Such script assumptions reveal a priori the attitudes and prejudices against racial minorities in the U.S.A. at different historical periods. These prejudices constitute a discourse of racism by framing the racial Other in stereotypes of delinquency, poverty, and crime. That is, indeed, how Puerto Ricans were conceived of in *WEST SIDE STORY*.

The first scenes of the film establish the dramatic conflict: two gangs fight for social spaces, public territories, and institutions. The first to appear are the Anglo-Americans, the absolute owners of the open spaces, that is, the streets and the basketball court. The crisis surges from the fact that the Jets do not allow the settlement of the Sharks in their territory or "home" (137). As a result, the drama articulates a binary and hierarchical opposition of power relations, and this binarism establishes the dominant paradigm of the musical film: Jets/ Sharks; U.S.A./ Puerto Rico; Center/ Periphery. Even the following binary oppositions can be read: Empire/ Colony; Native/ Alien; Identity/ Alterity; Sameness/ Difference.

This bipolarity becomes further materialized iconically in the gangs' names: Jets/ Sharks. When the film starts, in the scene where the Sharks are pursuing the Jets, on a wall in the background appears the drawing of a shark with its mouth wide open, exposing its sharp teeth. Such an iconic representation emphasizes the

criminal and barbaric potential of all Puerto Ricans. Such Puerto Rican barbarism is confirmed when one of the Jets pronounces,

"The Sharks bite hard and...we must stop them now."

Clearly the bite has metonymical implications of cannibalism and of sharks' horrifying ferocity. For this reason, Sharks is used as the metaphor to denominate immigrant Latino Otherness coming from the Caribbean. The opposition of Jets vs. Sharks reproduces an ideological configuration that opposes cultural technology to nature, aerial military techniques to primitive and savage instincts, civilization to barbarity. In this context the musical film could be read as an imperialist discourse in which the colonized are represented as a threat to the process and progress of the imperialist and civilizing enterprise.

In this first scene the two gangs have contrasting physical and racial appearances. Most of the Anglo-Americans are blond, strong, dynamic, and healthy and so embody the ideologeme: "All-American Boy." On the other hand, the Puerto Ricans are black haired, dark skinned, and skinny. This first representation installs the spectator within readymade, stereotypical models of race and socio-cultural behavior. In the scene the Puerto Ricans provoke the Anglo-Americans, and for such actions the Jets expel the Puerto Ricans from their territory. The rejection and exclusion of the racial and cultural Other is made totally explicit with a graffiti stating, "Sharks stink." Later this insult becomes monumentalized as the Jets associate the Puerto Ricans with cockroaches: when Anita, looking for Tony, enters the candy store, one of the Jets whistles "La Cucaracha."

After a rigorous examination of the scenes, one can detect that the Anglo-Americans generally establish command by speaking first and defining the Puerto Ricans in a pejorative way. Take for example the policeman's arrival at the basketball court in the first scene, and later at the candy store. In both scenes the Puerto Ricans are ordered to leave. The policeman wants to talk only to the Jets. In this way the immigrants' voice becomes silenced and marginalized. The policeman says:

"Get your friends out of here, Bernardo, and stay out!...
Please!...Boy, oh, boy...As if this neighborhood wasn't crummy enough."

Indeed, the original text reads:

"Boy, what you Puerto Ricans have done to this neighborhood." (138)

"All right, Bernardo, get your trash outa here (139)."

Although the policeman's statement indicates abuse of power by an agent of power, his individualization as a character does not excuse him from participating in the blatant racism in the apparatus of power. He consciously favors the expulsion of the Latinos:

"I gotta put up with them and so do you" (139).

It is never a matter of acceptance or integration. Even the Jets make use of a racist and discriminatory discourse in order to expel the Sharks:

"We do own [the streets] (140)."

"We fought hard for this territory and it's ours. The PR's can move in right under our noses and take it away (141)."

"We're drawin' the line."

"We're hangin' a sign/ Says 'visitors forbidden'/ And we ain't kiddin'!"

Between the two gangs erupts a hostile confrontation and warlike intensity because the Jets want to maintain their territory and socio-political order. The Other threatens to snatch away their spaces and institutions (the gymnasium, the basketball court, the streets, and the candy store). The Jets are not willing to give up:

"We fought hard for this turf and we ain't just going to give it up...These PR's are different. They keep on coming like cockroaches."

Clearly the Jets judge the Puerto Rican migration to the urban center as an invasion of cockroaches which reproduces without control and infects the territory. In order to exterminate them, the Jets prepare for a war: the rumble. These scenes conceive of the Puerto Ricans only in their whole criminal and barbaric potential. The Jets transfer skillfully the concept of their deadly weapons to the Puerto Ricans:

"They might ask for blades, zip guns...But if they say blades, I say blades..."

Those in power enunciate the discourse of the Other. By using such an ideological strategy of transference and transposition, the script, in the lines assigned to the Jets, accentuates and perpetuates stereotypes about Latinos, their ways of doing things, and the image of them as criminals. The Puerto Ricans are only defined in their criminal potentiality, as carrying weapons that the Jets will have to face and to deem equal. Indeed, when the rumble takes place, the Puerto Ricans' disposition to fight (and to assassinate) is accentuated by the script having them arrive first at the location. In this scene when Tony tries to make peace, Bernardo refuses reconciliation. This stereotype of Puerto Ricans' aggression and violence becomes emphasized by their killing a Jet first. Also, it cannot be forgotten that in the prelude to the song "America," one of the young women also jokingly defines Puerto Ricans as criminals:

"You'll go back with handcuffs!" (165).

In this manner an assumed criminality of Puerto Ricans becomes stereotyped in the eyes of the Anglo-American audience.

The dance scene in the gymnasium is vital for visualizing the divisive frontier line between the two gangs. Skin color, dress codes (particularly for the women) and dance styles define the two gangs. This iconography refers to cultural dress codes, as well as ways of dancing. In the dance the action changes its course: the hatred between the gangs seems open to the possibility of communication and living

together. This possibility arises from the physical attraction between Tony and Maria. Their relationship will become a story of love (of course, impossible), which will predominate from then on as the principal story line.

Maria and Tony's first encounter means love at first sight. The camera captures them exchanging glances, and these glances erase ethnic and racial differences. Such an effacement is duplicated in the camera focus: the space (and gang members) surrounding Tony and Maria are blurred. This juxtaposition situates the couple's love relationship in a mental and utopic space: the newly fallen-in-love couple ignore and absent themselves from immediate reality. From then on Tony and Maria face a dilemma of trying to locate themselves in an historical, urban space which will permit and respect their interracial relationship. Undoubtedly they, and the audience, expect this relationship to result in marriage. Both of them are conscious of their ethnic and racial difference; as Maria says:

"But you're not one of us...and I am not one of yours."

Tony will express later in a song his search for such an ideal space and time:

"There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us...
There's a time for us,
Someday a time for us...
Somewhere
We'll find a new way of living...
There's a place for us, a time and place for us.
Hold my hand and we're halfway there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there.
Someday, somehow, somewhere!"

In this way, by erasing the historical present (in the time of the movie), the plot establishes the impossibility of an interracial marriage. Romantic melodrama is a strategy of power to hide and soften the racist discourse. The film's narrative detour from warfare to love story functions as camouflage. In these terms, the system of power disassociates itself from any consciousness of racial prejudices and discriminations. Indeed, Tony and Maria become the scapegoats of a racist discourse because their relationship must end in a tragedy. Although their utopic interracial marriage cannot take place, the apparatus of power does not take any responsibility for it.

Instead, the blame falls on the Puerto Ricans because Chino assassinates Tony in revenge for Bernardo's death. Hence, Latinos' Otherness functions within a chain reaction of provocation: the Puerto Ricans provoke the Jets by killing one of them, Tony responds by killing Bernardo, and the chain is closed when Chino kills Tony. With this final death, a happy-ever-after outcome for Maria (and audience) is impossible. In addition, in this last scene the apparatus of power exercises its authority and control by arresting Chino; prison is the only space available for criminal immigrants. Thus, the story contains a chain reaction, a circuit of events which begins and ends with the policeman as the representative of power.

In the final scene the audience identifies with Maria, whose role is that of a mediator. The perceiving spectator disidentifies with Chino, and although viewers may feel some compassion, clearly only Chino bears the blame for the tragedy.

Nevertheless it does not cross viewers' mind that Tony is also a criminal. His crime is obscured behind Maria's love:

"When love comes so strong,
There's no right or wrong,
Your love is your life!"

Ironically, although Tony has killed her brother, she cannot stop adoring him: "Te adoro, Anton." In this scene Maria evokes *la piedad* while holding Tony's corpse in her arms. This image evokes a Christian cultural repertoire that depends on melodrama for its lachrymose manipulation. It also articulates a series of connotations about woman as submissive and suffering mother, as the mother of sorrow and solitude.

Given that Chino will be incarcerated and that Tony is dead, the film's ideological message implies the extermination of all Puerto Ricans and a desire for them to return to their place of origin. Is there no possibility for a future Puerto Rican generation in the U.S.A.? The answer is provided by the text itself as Maria sings the last song. Clearly she states that there is no place for her integration:

"Hold my hand and we're halfway there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you there.
Someday
Somehow
Some..."

Maria cannot mention a place for her future happiness; in this way her love remains suspended. She dreams about a utopia of love after life because the "where" cannot be located either in her present or her place of origin. This "would-be world" does not exist in the text, and tragedy instead of marriage is the only possible ending for the love's closure. In the tragic finale Maria remains on the threshold of "America." She is marginalized, hysterical, and hateful:

"WE ALL KILLED HIM; and my brother and Riff, I, too. I CAN KILL
NOW BECAUSE I HATE NOW (223)."

At the end, while holding Tony's corpse, she becomes delirious, wishing to join him in the utopic space of eternal love.

No doubt the space without socio-historical contradictions that Maria longs for is beyond the grave. There she would meet with Romeo and Juliet, the literary prototype of the bourgeois melodrama of impossible love. With the film having such a transcendental, ahistorical, and assumed universality in its ending, it erases all historicity. What it re-produces is a mythification whereby WEST SIDE STORY perpetuates itself for its aesthetic, literary, and apolitical values. Take for example the following comment from film critic Stanley Kauffman:

"WEST SIDE STORY has been over-burdened with discussion about its comment on our society. It offers no such comment. As a sociological study, it is of no use, in fact, it is somewhat facile. What it does is to utilize certain conditions artistically — a vastly different process. Though much of the work dance and song and cinematic skill fuse into

a contemporary theatrical poem."[5]

There is no doubt that the song "America" and its choreography constitute one of the most rhythmic, energetic, and vital hits in the history of musical comedy.[5] Although a Puerto Rican sings it, its patriotic message is delivered by an assimilated immigrant who despises her origin and autochthonous culture for her preference of the comfort of the "American way of life." This song with Spanish rhythm and a "typical Spanish" choreography centers the spectator in the exoticism and spontaneity of Latino Otherness. Nevertheless, the lyrics make the audience concentrate on the patriotic message exposed in the political exchange between Anita and Bernardo. The song, performed by the Puerto Ricans on the roof of the building (notice how they are confined to closed spaces), pretends to be Puerto Rican self-definition or enunciation. The song's confrontation of identities takes place when the Puerto Ricans consciously take sides on issues of nationalist ethnicity, and assimilation. The importance of this scene does not simply derive from its comical aspect but also lies in the fact that here the Puerto Ricans insult each other for being divided politically and ideologically between nationalists and assimilated.

This scene was a racist and defamatory articulation towards Puerto Rico in the original text. In the film version, it was revised in order to soften a negative attitude toward Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican immigrants. Indeed the song "America" in its two versions consolidates the drama's political and ideological nucleus. Although in the original version, Anita proclaims openly her total assimilation and scorns her native land and its historico-cultural reality, the cinematographic version makes use of irony when she is singing, "My heart's devotion." Immediately the line is followed by a statement of contempt: "Let it sink back in the ocean."

ORIGINAL TEXT:

"Puerto Rico...You ugly island...
Island of tropic diseases.
Always the hurricanes blowing.
Always the population growing...
And the money owing. And the babies crying.
And the bullets flying." (167)

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TEXT:

"Puerto Rico...My heart's devotion...
Let it sink hack in the ocean.
Always the hurricanes blowing,
Always the population growing.
And money owing. And the sunlight streaming.
And the natives steaming..."

Anita enunciates Puerto Rican reality as an underdeveloped country with all kinds of natural disasters, socio-economic and demographic problems, and crime. Although Bernardo discredits and demythifies Anita's exaltation of the "American Dream," his comments are subordinated and silenced because of the song's patriotic pro-U.S.A. propaganda. Anita expels any dissidence against the "American Dream" in "the land of opportunity":

"If it's so nice at home, why don't you go back there? I know a boat you can get on (167)."

Furthermore, Anita echoes the dominant ideology as she advocates total assimilation according to the example of other immigrant people in the past:

"Ai! Here comes the whole commercial. The mother of Tony was born in Poland; the father still goes to night school. Tony was born in America, so that makes him an American. But us? Foreigners! (165)"

In this way the myth of immigration to the U.S. is reactualized; those who may not like it can leave the land of Uncle Sam. In such terms, the prejudices, discrimination, and racism that Latinos face in the U.S.A. are eliminated and silenced. What the song emphasizes and expresses is the economic prosperity and the instant material gratification of immigrants. Anita voices the dominant imperial ideology in the original text:

"Automobile in America. Chromium steel in America.
Wire-spoke wheel in America. Very big deal in America!
I like the shores in America! Comfort is yours in America.
Knobs on the doors in America.
Wall-to-wall floors in America!"

In spite of Anita's assimilation, once she finds out that Bernardo is dead, she changes her attitude towards the Anglo-American system. Ironically Anita, the most assimilated, ends up the most ethnic by affirming her cultural difference. Such difference becomes impregnated with hatred up to the point of telling the Jets, without fear and in total challenge:

"Bernardo was right...If one of you was bleeding in the street, I'd walk by and spit on you" (219).

From a position of pain and rage, she advises Maria to forget Tony and, "Stick to your own kind!" In this scene, now it is Anita advocating racial and ethnic segregation. In this way the system of power does not experience any guilt feelings for its racial discrimination — provided that Puerto Ricans will always be Puerto Ricans, and in instances of crisis, no matter how assimilated, they will always join their own people. The threat of racial Otherness is concretized in Anita's self-consciousness; difference, by extension, means the potential to rebellion and socio-political subversion.[7]

On the other hand, now that Anita opposes Maria and Tony's interracial marriage, the system of power exempts itself from preventing such a marriage. In the end, it is the Puerto Ricans themselves who advocate getting married with members of the same race and culture.

WEST SIDE STORY has had international fame and success. I have demonstrated how the universal plot of a love story registers, in its historical specificity, a racist

discourse. Critics elided the issue of racism and concentrated on urban problems of juvenile delinquency. The choreography was highly praised, and a critic even proposed conserving the film as a cultural monument:

"If a time-capsule is about to be buried anywhere, this film ought to be included, so that possible future generations can know how an artist of ours [Robbins] made our most congenial theatrical form to respond to some of the beauty in our time and to the humanity in some of its ugliness."[8]

This "ugliness" cannot be verbalized because it would uncover the truth: WEST SIDE STORY discursively articulates racial discrimination in the U.S.A.

However the racist discourse is not totally silenced within the textual surface. In one scene when Anita enters the candy store, the practice of racism flourishes openly. While stopping her, one of the Jets says:

"She's too dark to pass."

Such a declaration confirms that the struggle for territorial supremacy is truly based on racial discrimination, of a sort which often is not euphemistic. In this way, the text contains its own critique of racism, which it locates in several domains: adolescence, juvenile delinquency, agents of power, and even in the spectators' point of view.

Another moment of possible racism appears in the film version when policeman Schrank kicks the Puerto Ricans out of the candy store and proposes a deal to live together in the neighborhood:

"I get a promotion, and you Puerto Ricans get what you've been itching for...use of the playground, use of the gym, the streets, the candy store. So what if they do turn this whole town into a stinking pig sty...What I mean is...Clear out, you! I said, Clear out!...Oh yeah, sure, I know. It's a free country and I ain't got no right. But I got a badge. What do you got? Things are tough all over. Beat it!"

There is no doubt that he has the power and the laws to protect the country from any threat, usurpation, or disorder. Although he justifies his abuse, he is applying the national law that legitimates his abusive actions. From such a hegemonic, hierarchical, and racist position, the badge gives him power and legitimization rights. The badge is the emblem that endorses his own racism and discrimination toward the racial Otherness whom he calls openly and insolently "Spics." If he has the badge, a symbol of power, superiority, and official law, all that the Puerto Ricans have is their skin.

The blanks must be filled in so that one can read explicitly the inscribed racism in the agent of power's actions: "You got the [dark] skin." It cannot be clearer: racist discourse does not disappear at all from the textual surface. Once you fill in the blanks, that discourse reappears and erupts, subverting the policeman as well as the institutions of legal justice, maximum representatives of Anglo-American power and law, in their own practices of racism.

"...the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition."

— Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*

I do not deny it at all. After seventeen years of living in the U.S.A. my own personal experience as an ethnic minority has led me to question the U.S. cultural and political system. I, who upon my arrival was an assimilated "American" and more Anglo-American than the "Americans," as the years passed became more Puerto Rican and more Latin American in the U.S.A. This process of disassimilation and decolonization resulted in this experiential and testimonial reading of WEST SIDE STORY: a differential, alternative, provocative, marginal, and radical reading. I do not deny that this is an ideological and political reading, but so are the ones that pretend to be neutral, like traditional scholarship in academia. My aim has been to question, to read from the margin, and to fill in the blanks with the "not-said" in order to decenter, subvert, and transgress WEST SIDE STORY's official ideological discourse. As a result, I have tried to demythify and rescue the racist ideology that was silenced but registered in the textual interstices. This racist discourse is clearly inscribed in institutions of cultural power like Hollywood and Broadway and their official critical response.

Finally, I rescue a quotation from Stephen Sondheim, who wrote WEST SIDE STORY's lyrics, when he was asked to collaborate in the musical. He declared openly that he had never met a single Puerto Rican, nor had he shared their socioeconomic disadvantages:

"I can't do this show...I've never been that poor and I've never even known a Puerto Rican." [9]

Then, what are the Puerto Ricans in WEST SIDE STORY? Are they simply literary products, ideological signs, and cultural discursive stereotypes of the Anglo-American sociopolitical system of power? Indeed, this cinematographic figurative construction has propagated the image of Puerto Ricans in the U.S.A. and internationally up to the point of becoming the referent *a priori*, the "model of/for" immigrant Puerto Rican ethnicity and identity. The reading gets more complicated when the Puerto Ricans themselves identify with this pseudo-ethnic film image produced by the U.S. cultural imperial power. Those readings rather reveal the colonial condition of Puerto Ricans. Once they are interpellated by the prefabricated Hollywood image—"Made in the U.S.A." — of their ethnicity, they identify with the imperial object/ image projected in the screen. The final result is their appropriating that image as their own and accepting it as the enunciation of their own socio-historical and cultural subjectivity.

Nevertheless, both Puerto Rican and Anglo-American spectators ignore that in order to achieve the perfect rivalry and hatred between the Sharks and the Jets, Robbins made use of discriminatory practices and racist implications. Even though such practices contributed to the success of the theatrical and cinematographic productions, they can easily be reactualized and reactivated in every single staging and screening:

"Jerry Robbins started WEST SIDE with a bunch of amateurs who had never played roles anywhere — just a bunch of kids who danced in shows. He would always call them in groups, 'You're the Jets,' and 'You're the Sharks.' He would put up articles about interracial street fighting all over the bulletin boards where he was rehearsing. He would encourage them not to eat lunch together, but to stay in groups." [10]

And, if those practices were not enough for the staging of the musical, Maria must also dye her skin dark in case the actress is too white to embody the Puerto Rican race. Such an action is the result of the Anglo-American socio-cultural and political system that conceptualizes all Puerto Ricans as a racial Other and stereotypes them as blacks. This happened to Jossie de Guzmán who had the role of Maria in the 1980 production on Broadway. If they darkened her skin, they did not have to do it to Debbie Allen, a black actress who played Anita, nor to Rita Moreno in the film version. De Guzmán commented with surprise:

"'Oh, my God, I am Puerto Rican — why do they have to darken my hair?' They darkened her pale skin too, and after a bit she liked that, wanting literally to 'get into the skin of Maria.'" [11]

Therefore, where do the Anglo-American cultural system's practices of racism start or end: in the rehearsals, in the theatrical production, in the screening of the film, or in the reception of the audience and the critics?

NOTES

1. *Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story*, edited by Norris Houghton (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1965; 167). The movie was produced by Mirisch Pictures in 1961, and it was distributed by United Artists. The play was staged at the Winter Garden Theater in New York City in 1957. In this essay I alternate the movie script with the theatrical text. The play was partially revised for the film. By using both versions my goal is to make of both a single cultural, ideological, and political text which rescues the silences or censorships in the movie version. All quotations belong to the above edition of WEST SIDE STORY; however, when there is no page number next to the quotation, I am using the movie dialogue directly.

2. *Broadway Song and Story*, edited by Otis L. Guernsey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985; 42).

3. Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989; 14).

4. Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987; 257).

5 "The Asphalt Romeo and Juliet," *The New Republic* (October 23, 1961): 28.

6. Jack Delano, a photographer who has lived in Puerto Rico and published a book with photos of the island and its people, observed in his introduction about the song "America":

"But the colonialism of the ruling nation goes further, for it colors the attitudes of nearly everyone who must deal with Puerto Rico. Even in its literature, art, and aesthetics, Puerto Rico is commonly misunderstood. The musical WEST SIDE STORY is relevant here. In the words of its most popular song, the United States is

referred to as 'America,' But no one in Puerto Rico ever refers to the United States as 'America' and no Puerto Rican ever did. All Latin peoples in the Southern Hemisphere believe that they are Americans, too. (Since they reached the New World and settled the Antilles more than a century before the first English colony was established in North America, they have a fair case.) And the melodies of Bernstein, for all their beauty, could only have been composed by someone for whom Mexican and Puerto Rican music are essentially the same — that is, 'Latin.' The rich and distinctive musical tradition of Puerto Rico is almost entirely absent from WEST SIDE STORY."

Puerto Rico Mío: Four Decades of Change (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 4.

7. A similar situation occurs when Bernardo says to the Jets before the rumble starts:

"More gracious living? Look, I don't go for that pretend crap you all go for in this country. Every one of you hates every one of us, and we hate you right back. I don't drink with nobody I hate, I don't shake hands with nobody I hate" (190).

It is evident that the ethnic minority defines itself in terms of hatred and violence while the Anglo-Americans never verbalize their hatred, I should say, their racism. The system of power allows for the minority to speak on its behalf, in this way, it takes no responsibility for discrimination and racial oppression.

8. S. Kauffmann, 29.

9. *Sondheim & Co.*, 14.

10. *Sondheim & Co.*, 19.

11. Nan Robertson, "Maria and Anita in WEST SIDE STORY," *The New York Times* (February 22, 1980): C-4.

The Three Caballeros Pato Donald's gender ducking

by José Piedra ^[1]
[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

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"The menace of Nazism and its allied doctrines, its techniques and tactics, must be understood from Hudson Bay to Punto [sic] Arenas. Wherever the motion picture can do a basic job of spreading the gospel of the Americas' common stake in this struggle, there that job must and shall be done." — John Hay Whitney, Director of the Motion Picture Section of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs under Franklin Delano Roosevelt.[2]

F.D.R.: "Somoza? Isn't that fellow supposed to be a son of a bitch?"
Cordell Hull, F.D.R.'s Secretary of State: "Yes, but he's our son of a bitch." — U.S. legend.[3]

"There's only one SOB in the studio, and that's me." — Walt Disney.[4]

NAZI LOVE

During the first menacing wave of nazism in the 1930s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs within the Motion Picture Section of the State Department. Its declared purpose was to "show the truth about the American way" and to that effect hired Hollywood Studios to engender propaganda geared to fulfill the promise of the U.S. Good Neighbor policy (Roosevelt's name for the U.S. Pan-American policy. Black, p. 69).

The unadvertised reason for the U.S. interest had much to do with the commercial exploitation of Latin lands and peoples of the Americas in the wake of a war-torn Europe. Companies such as the United Fruit Company began buying big farms in our Latin American countries, importing alien business practices, producing "raw materials," selling us bad technological progress and processed products, and ultimately exporting labor and money to the United States. This cycle became practically unbreakable as it fostered a federal Latin dependency, bureaucratically centered in Washington. What interests me here are the sexual innuendos behind the well-known U.S. patriarchal fostering of Latin American dependency.

The slogan "the American way" and the notion of "engendering," not to mention

the phrase "good neighbor," are loaded with biased libidinal connotations. The "American way" refers to the United States styling itself as the model for Pan-American political unity or, more dramatically, the unifying principle for the American continental unity — which included a rationale for sleeping by or with the "giant of the North." [5] I use the term "engendering" in regard to the propaganda machinery to refer to the colonizers' highly arbitrary assignation of gender to the colonial subject as part of the local Other acquiring international Selfhood. As I will illustrate later on, the colonial propaganda scheme that the U.S. has put in place in the Americas imposes its own simplistic libidinal dialectic. Whoever rose to "the top" represented the male, international, civilized Self ready to conquer, package, and import himself as the savior. Whoever remained at "the bottom" was relegated to being female, local, savage, and Other, someone who had to be made ready to be conquered, packaged, and exported.

Ultimately the U.S., self-styled as a good neighbor, stands as an incestuous *padre de familias* who, while ostensibly teaching his Pan-American children to forge their own nations, libidinally encourages their dependency. The system even teaches us Latin Americans how to become the "child brides" of the United States. Thus we Latins in and around the U.S. backyard become not only the poor live-in neighbor but the tantalizing girl-next-door — not to mention the fruit-next-door — so dear to the United Fruit Company's heart.

Social and sexual politics, engendering and gendering, brotherhood and paternalism, family and colonial affairs, go hand in hand in transforming the Americas into a *falsa-Pan-Americana* unit, which led to the construction of Latin Americans as America's Latin "minions." As U.S. minions we can only take a rather hysterical form of action or assume a disposable form of libidinal power. We are recognized as being endowed with a kind of languorous hyposexuality or frantic hypersexuality that does not translate into a productive, but rather into a showy and superfluous kind of libido, be it it receptive or assertive. This sexually united state of affairs renders Latin America into a unit of people dependent on the patriarchal and promiscuous outreach of the United States. If! am right, some forms of colonial homogenization even lead to postcolonial homosexualization.

Throughout this century the U.S. has placed itself at the head of a self-serving propaganda and propagation campaign geared to ensure its libidinal hold on the "American" species — in short, the U.S. is libidinally cloning itself. Sometimes it seems convenient to persuade us Latins to make love, war, or babies, and other times it does not; the same goes for any other crop. Sterilizations, performed on Puerto Ricans, Newyoricans, and Neo-Ricans during the first half of this century, alternate with peace, welfare, and CARE campaigns throughout the Latin continent for the duration of this century. [6] The issue was to make us believe that we needed such a control. Indeed, the balance between crop and love, or genital control, and ultimately between commercial life and death, habitually walks a colonial tightrope between alien imposition and native desire.

A more recent example, the testing and usage of pesticides, proves the point from another angle. In places like Costa Rica, the U.S. export of questionable pesticides allegedly improves crops and proportionally decreases the natives' life expectancy or desire and ability to procreate, while preserving and even enriching the alien testers and users. Warmaking, lovemaking, and moneymaking intertwine

colonially, as alien agents continue to have commerce on the love life and deadly wars of Latin peoples of the Américas.

The (in)famous guerrilla movements with which South of the Border nations have come to be associated lead to endemic "coups d'etat"-coopted by the U.S. if the guerrillas opt for a pro-gringo stance. The process of rebelling "for" the United States makes this country condone the institutionalization of guerrilla movements as their surrogate up-and-coming governments. In other words, after doing the dirty work for the gringo, the Latino rebels ostensibly ask for the latter's protection, seduce the powers that be, and/or endorse solutions embedded in a gringo cause. In short, the guerrilla leader becomes the United States' "s.o.b." — no different from those exemplified in the epigraph by the surrogate tyrannies enacted by Somoza and Disney in the name of American policy and entertainment. Perhaps the worst aspect of such a state of affairs is its hypocrisy: the U.S. fakes (organizationally and orgasmically) being called into action by bitchy South of the Border warriors.

There were even hints early on in the century of a U.S.-sponsored federation that echoed Bolívar's own nineteenth-century dream and which would turn the South of the Borderlands into a federation of providers of raw materials, beginning with fruits and vegetables and expanding to other marketable products. As observed by Bolívar himself, in the epigraph, liberty itself was included as a trade commodity in the American marketplaces, as was life itself and the pursuit of happiness — a lush variant on the French revolution's *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. Tacitly, the U.S. take on liberty seems to include a Latin mixture of fun and profit through produce, markets, vacation paradises, gambling casinos, whorehouses, etc..

To that effect the U.S. anti-nazi campaign of the thirties was as good an excuse as any to seek refuge in Latin hands. As a result, the United States posed not just as a model of Pan-American unity but as the butt of Pan-American seduction, serving, at once, as organizational principle and orgasmic hope of the deprived and depraved Latin masses. The U.S. would export itself as a policy construct that would lead the world into a lovingly free, egalitarian, and brotherly tyranny: that of a United States of the Americas.

Consider that the entertainment industry is one ostensibly freed by its relentless pursuit of fiction from a serious commitment to telling the truth about, or pointing out the cynicism of the "American way." It is not surprising, therefore, that such an industry would profit from the hypocritical defense of continental American colonialism dressed up as the U.S. anti-nazism and as a seductive union with Big Brother. Since very early in this century Hollywood, particularly M.G.M., Twentieth-Century Fox, and the Disney Studio, collaborated with the United Fruit Company and other multinationals in putting the finishing touches on the selling of the trans(en)gendering American way to the rest of the Américas.[7]

The history of the Disneying of anti-nazi propaganda in the Americas has been sketched and protested by Walt Disney himself, as well as by George Black in a book cynically titled *Good Neighbors*. [8] The after-shocks of the U.S. attempt to substitute its own brand of internationalism for a variety of nationalist socialism was tackled by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart in *How to Read Donald Duck*, and stressed by David Kunzle's "Introduction to the English Edition" of this book. These remarkable views about the Disney mystique address the libidinal

politics that resulted from the anti-nazi and pro-U.S. campaign South of the Border, a topic that is more poignantly discussed in pioneering works by Cynthia Enloe and Julianne Burton.[9] Enloe and Burton, go further than Dorfman and Mattelart in proposing a connection between the U.S. exploitation of Latin American fruits and other produce and what I term the upsurge of Latin American "fruitiness." [10] The Disney model that these critics review is either heterosexual or pansexually masturbatory; homosexual activities are "corrected" by Disney as Latin American deviation from a world norm.[11] To my mind, not all such corrections are in place, successful, or even desirable.

My rereading of Disney Latin American *obra maestra* prompts me to break the thin line between the intended homogenization and the subliminal homosexualizing effects of Pan-American policy.[12] Regardless of one's feelings toward homosexuality, one would acknowledge a colonial policy that enacts a curious democratization of genders — some would choose the derogatory term "inversion" of genders. And indeed the sort of homosexuality I am referring to here might be taken to be a "foreign sort of gender inversion," as it tends to homogenize Latin Americans based on what the patriarchal system considers to be the lowest common gender denominator: the infantilized and effeminized figure of the colonized, be it a man or a woman [see Figure 1].

If there was a concerted U.S. strategy of political and sexual Pan-American "unification," it was condemned to backfire, creating a crew of caricaturesque/cartoonesque *amigos* and *amigas* who proved themselves capable of uncontrollable exchanges with their neighborly *Americanos/as*. For better or for worse the undeniable power of the Other rests between her/his legs. Perhaps the ultimate irony of such a post-colonial bedding game is that it unifies seduction, rejection, and compliance as power tricks. In spite of the ethical problems of differentiation, seduction, viewed as a unifying force, stands alone in the realm of sexual politics insofar as it hardly distinguishes between its effects (rejection or compliance) or even between its roles — the fucker and the fucked.

Seduction is a surprisingly democratic power base. The seducing agent can place him/herself on either side of the passive/active or receptive/insertive axis; what matters is who exerts the will. Therefore, seduction has little to do with the type of meta-sexual enforcement associated with rape. Only those who willfully accept the relative positions of fucker and fucked share the power of the libidinal union engineered through seduction. This is so in the realm of the personal as well as in the realm of the political. And yet, the illusion remains that someone or some country has seduced another and that the seduction is not mutual or reversible.

The colonial realm, be it social or personal, attempts to preserve the illusion that seduction is a form of empowerment which, even if it comes from the Other, is dictated, or at least manipulated, by the Self. Thus it is surprising that a film media mogul such as Disney proposes the permanent illusion (fiction) of seduction: Latin America making the United States love it (and fuck it) in ways that would be otherwise unnatural to the gringo tradition — not to mention to the Latino/a tradition.

At any rate, Othered libidos — such as our own from South of the Border — are likely capable of reversing the most staunch of North-of-the-Border-imposed gender roles. Whereas socially or politically speaking, the masculine construct of

himself "on top" retains a certain power advantage, this is not so in its sexual interpretation. Summing up the situation, fear of ideological or actual nazi invasion condoned, eased, and justified ideologically charged libidinal invasions, including the U.S. being on top of its Latin "charges" or being the victim of electrifyingly Latin libidinal charges. The effect of such a reversible invasion concocts a slow time bomb, whose detonation is shared between invader and invaded (fucker and fucked) — and, according to its after effects, it is hard to tell who is who, who is on top, or who is the hardest hit.

It is up to each of us Pan-American readers to decide to what extent cultural bordercrossing could become gender crossings and transgressive sexual embraces, and whether or not the Pan-American strategy embraced by Hollywood is or is not a good thing for the Latin "natives" and for their "alien" filmmakers.

TRANS(EN)GENDERING AMERICANA

Wartorn Europe served as a backdrop for an anti-nazi and pro-Pan-American love-thy-neighbor propaganda campaign that gave tacit permission to Hollywood giants such as M.G.M., Twentieth-Century Fox, and the Disney Studio to market the people of the Americas for U.S. entertainment. M.G.M and Twentieth-Century Fox led the way in producing live action films that would uphold U.S. ideological, erotic, and commercial interests. At first such interests converged in a trio of "banana republics" close to the yankee's heart and home. I am referring to the initial U.S. engagement of Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. Other countries, most notably Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, as well as "vaguely defined" areas of the Amazon and the Andes, soon followed on the "second-banana" list. However, for a while, the pioneering Caribbean "islands" of Hispanic American culture took a special place in political history and in the film industry as icons of a Pan-American federation, as well as the butt of Pan-American exploitation.

Under the aegis of Latin America's U.S-sponsored technical "innocence," need for money, lack of workers' rights, and gullibility for propaganda, or lack of choice in all of the above, Disney and the United Fruit Company expanded and "improved" on the Caribbean stereotypes. Disney also counted on animation's creative freedom, apparent sexlessness, and appetite for violence to project caricatured images of the friendly natives South of the Border hitting (on) each other senseless(ly) in order to muster up Uncle Sam's approval. Such caricatures easily transferred into Hollywood's live action films, Madison Avenue propaganda clichés, and the U.S. media's simplistic slogans and jingles still with us today — for instance in the heritage of Chiquita Banana and her spinoffs. While Disney and the rest of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, the U.S. media et al. exploited this continent's "fruity" character, the United Fruit Company took care of our fruits. I would like to speak first of Hollywood's libidinal exploitation of the Caribbean island trio, ostensibly for the adult film-viewing audience, so as to foreground Disney's cartoon strategy, whose subliminal eroticism was ostensibly geared to make children grow more "American."

Films such as MGM's CUBAN LOVE STORY (1932) proposed to package my native island as the Caribbean beachhead of U.S. erotic, industrial, and federal landings, while songs such as "Lamento Borincano," in which the Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernández laments the conditions of his native island sadly became

distorted as premonition for the U.S. welfare policy toward Puerto Rico.[13] At a more specifically libidinal level, Havana was earmarked as a savage enclave, the American capital of romance, escapism, and sexism, and San Juan as a childish society, a sad capital in need of gringo consolation, parenting, and/or espousing. Cuba the noble savage and Puerto Rico the wild child stood as barely different stages in the same gringo caretaking scheme.

To my mind these stages were loaded with gender implications, both the wild child and noble savage stages implying a deliberate "infantilizing," "effeminizing" of "locals." The native population was targeted to become willing victims/ will-less virgins of their alien occupants. And to that effect, the U.S. geared its propaganda machine to transform the Caribbean into a playland of subliminal socio-sexual transvestism leading to a gender-troubled colonial policy. Indeed the parallel simplistic media renditions of Cuba and Puerto Rico furnished excuses for both the social and the sexual occupation of men and women of these islands. The excuses act retrospectively since Puerto Rico, and at least part of Cuba and its constitution, in principle already belonged to the United States and its people had been forced to espouse gringos and their system.

Completing the U.S. picture of the Caribbean was a singularly biased view of the Dominican Republic, which did not seem to need Hollywood films in order to join in the U.S. sponsored unification or exploitation. The island was presided over by Trujillo, who at once went on periodic rampages, killing every Haitian in sight, and paradoxically worked "on his own" on the notion of a Pan-American federation, the League of Nations — apparently leading to the United States of Latin America. As an indirect consequence of such a bloody, second-rate move toward Pan-American unity, the Dominican Republic achieved a high level of dependence, including the export of women to work in the sweatshops and the streets not only of the United States but of Cuba, Puerto Rico, even Haiti. Only in hindsight did the exportation of Cuban women (mostly to Florida's tobacco industries) and of Puerto Rican women (largely to the New York area's garment sweatshops) reach the level of exploitation of Dominicans.

The transformation of social into sexual politics which zeroes in on the offensive treatment of Caribbean women, and of every Caribbean person as an infantilized woman, is very much alive. The Walt Disney Studio magnified the conditions of libidinal dependency to embrace the entire area of the Américas. It created a pretentiously innocent mix of infantilization and feminization with few parallels in international sexual politics. Disney's earlier efforts consisted of puritanical coatings of the Latin powers of seduction through a series of part-film/ part-animation features aimed at the children of the U.S., but subliminally geared toward the innocent parents of these children and to further the not-so-innocent worldwide interest of the patriarchal Uncle Sam. My main interest is *THE THREE CABALLEROS*, a technically accomplished, ambivalently gendered, sexually provocative, libidinally harassing film.

In *THE THREE CABALLEROS*, Uncle Walt creates, directly or indirectly, several male and female characters who iconize a highly libidinalized and violently transgendered bounty targeted to yield to Uncle Sam. Arguably none of the icons of dependency is more insidiously lasting and damaging than those of Joe Carioca and Carmen Miranda. The former is indeed the full-fledged cartoon product

already brought out in an earlier feature of the Disney Studio: a cigar-smoking, eye-rolling Pan-Americano pygmy trapped in the green body of a Brazilian parrot. [14] In spite of his phallic cigar and retractable umbrella, Joe is seductively feminine, even subversively queer, for instance, in his ability to sell his native Bahía and himself with the batting of his eyelashes [see Figure 21].

The female archetypal project was suggested by the Disney Studio but completed by other Hollywood filmmakers: a sometime-cartoon and sometime-actress-in-the-flesh Pan-Americana giantess trapped in the red body of a flaming whore, complete with foot-binding platform shoes and a mind-bending headdress spilling fruits. Carmen, in spite of some exaggerated secondary female characteristics, fruit and all, is decidedly a bitch goddess with ridiculous male-like fits of aggression. The film section of the State Department's blueprint for the Carmen Miranda project proposed to "create 'Pan-Americana,' a noble female figure bearing a torch and a cross, subtly suggesting both the Virgin Mary and the Goddess of Liberty" (Black, p. 69). Indeed Carmen becomes a Latin icon, not just as a virgin and a goddess of liberty but as a show woman and a fruit-laden horn of plenty. As we shall see, other characters, mainly Joe Carioca and Donald, play the Carmen role with its full plethora of transgendered connotations.

The man who would light the torch of Carmen, the freedom-fighting virgin goddess, was not a local fellow but the imported Donald Duck, no glowing image of red-blooded U.S. males. And yet, even this U.S. duck was supposed to he-man enough to pinch Carmen's fruits. Donald's masculinity or lack thereof was not the issue here, for he represented a form of commercial seduction that relied on the subliminal message and the imposition of the will, rather than on the frontal attack or bravado. Furthermore, he replaced Mickey Mouse as the "International Symbol of Good Will" following a 1935 declaration of Trujillo's (U.S.-backed League of American Nations (Dorfman and Mattelart, p. 19). The U.S. torch of liberty in the Américas thus passed from Mickey Mouse to Donald Duck in pursuit of a basket of fruit and a torch singer and torrid dancer with a woman attached — the sort of Latin woman who, in the gringo imagination, makes him give up protectionist politics.

Joe Carioca is sometimes rebaptized Jose Carioca — as in *THE THREE CABALLEROS*' "companion" book *Donald Duck Sees South America*. [15] The role of Carmen Miranda is sometimes played by her sister Aurora — as is the case in *THE THREE CABALLEROS*. Thus, Disney made efforts to Hispanicize and clone the Brazilian stereotypes. This generalization also expands on and crosses over the dialectics of gender and sexual categories. *THE THREE CABALLEROS* moves from a Carmen-like aggressive cookie vendor/ vedette/ bombshell to more "regressively feminine" Mexican bathing beauties and singing actresses, who tempt and reject or ignore the Donald's "masculinity." From the male regressivity of the parrot performer Joe Carioca, the cartoon moves to more "aggressively masculine" characters such as Panchito — the mariachi-dressed cock who tests and denigrates the Donald's "masculinity," and eventually becomes the third of the "gay" caballeros [see Figure 31].

These less-than-ideal images of Latin humanity belong to a line of caricatures of which Disney emerges as a pioneering expert: the subliminally phallus-prone or unnaturally phallic Latin señorita and the unnaturally macho or subliminally sissy

Latino. All of them, and some of us, live by someone else's banana policy.

FREEDOM TO CARMEN

As proposed by the Carmen prototype, Latin American females retained a role combining the model of the feisty whore with the golden heart and the willing virgin with the poisonous passion fruit — as paradoxical platforms of humanitarian activity/ passivity. There is no quality control or assurance of purity in the pursuit of freedom nor in the pursuit of happiness, much less in colonial situations such as the lingering U.S. shadow over Latin America. On the one hand, the iconic U.S. definition of liberty for all points toward an all consuming French-imported Manhattanite virgin, the Statue of Liberty. This French virginal connection pursues Carmen, who, in the film *COPACABANA* (1947) adopts the part-time persona of bitch (touch-me-not) goddess Mlle. Fifi (Miss Sissi?) in contrast with her own hypersexual persona as Brazilian bombshell (Carmen the "tico-tico" queen of sex).

As she impersonates the French statue, Carmen becomes a parody of a towering, passive-aggressive immigrant bronze diva with a green card and patina who has stuck to the hope and to the memory of so many immigrants like myself regardless of our point of entry into the U.S. We all pass through, without apparently touching, her. The virgin of liberty beckons to her port, signaling the end of the ultimate trip of trips: immigration to the land of the free and carte blanche to consume — some would say prostitute one's "native" ideals as an Other without sharing the Self's bounty. As she plays herself, Carmen becomes a piece of the show, entertaining the U.S. crowds. But she has not only the opportunity to be touched but the power to touch her audiences. After all she is a consumable but still "erect" Chiquita Banana-type of label stuck to U.S.-bound Latino bananas and other fruits — be they male or female in appearance and attitude. As a statuesque and aloof female of French derivation or as a fruity Brazilian populist diva in close contact with the libido of American males, Carmen's *razón de ser* is as native product in shaky transit to a foreign market.

The U.S. colonial outlook tends to render Latinas, and above all Latinos, as sexually helpless toward their own or, at least, unable to compete with an Americana/o whom they need in order to fulfill their manifest destiny. In short, we need to be brought into the foreign market of gender and sexuality, since we all provide the natural, and even the unnatural, national territory that becomes the target of the international invasion of the libido. A subliminal American fantasy, shared by masculinists and feminists alike, is to pose as the announcer or denouncer of the role of the Latin macho, and to then be forced, because of Latino inadequacy, Latina pressure, and good-old-American guilt, to impersonate that macho role him- or herself. Indeed this American tragedy is also in effect beyond sexual politics. The U.S. military establishment and the peace movements (from the antinuclear to the ecological avant-gardes) prefer to take an active part in designing — or pretending to design — the international *macho* monster that would require U.S. attention: saving the poor defenseless *señorita* country which a local competitor is intent on devastating. The saving fantasy is endemic to U.S. Latin American policy. The U.S. is ready to defend us against the local *macho* — conquistadors, caudillos, guerrilleros, matadors — raping of our women, nature, systems, environment.

Ca. 1992 the long list of Spanish macho monsters converge in the U.S. media's

recycling of Columbus as a senseless imperialist macho and genocidal maniac. The alternatives are few, but I can think of at least another type of machos-on-show: the Miami-produced homoerotic calendar *Men of Cuba*.^[16] Let us remember that these unfairly competing Latinos in the world market remain poised against a rather dubious model of red-blooded American maleness, such as the Donald in the role of imperialist duck. Perhaps the ultimate perversion of a feminine-sensitive — rather than feminist — society like the U.S. is translating the guilt of machismo to the South of the Border machos they deride.

The responsibility for the hype about maleness lies with the alien Latin American machos as much as the responsibility for the hype about femaleness lies with the corresponding señoritas. *Machos* and *señoritas* made me do "it." Latin machos might be high on the scale of testosterone but low on the totem pole; Latin señoritas might be high on the pedestal but low on the scale of rights. Even our best cock and pussycat cannot compete with a lowly duck Donald or with the mousiest Minnie. And, given the currency of the clichés even among our best-meaning American liberals, I would like to return to the source — nipping, as it were, the Chiquita banana syndrome in the bud.

CARMEN AND I

Carmen's paradoxical genesis as the prize fruit of Latin American womanhood points to an international media tragedy. In an Anglo-Latin scene of conquest, Latinas tend to lose to stereotypical Americano invasions which presumably save these women from the local *machos* but reaches them for worse. An alien *macho* will likely take the local's place. An alien *señorita* will likely do the same. For instance, in my Cuban primal scene, heavily sprinkled with Hollywood shooting stars, Americanos were more dashing than the local *macho* heroes and Americanas were prettier, faster, and worth more than the local *señorita* martyrs of tropical desire. This travesty of human exchange across national frontiers of gender and sex increases proportionally with alien bouts of political/ libidinal domination.

It is not surprising for the worldwide history of colonialism to find that U.S. colonizing forces have waged in film an "effeminizing" and "infantilizing" campaign toward Latin Americans, including the United States' own "minority" targets. Indeed the ultimate goal of the good neighbor policy's film propaganda campaign was to homogenize/ homosexualize Latinos/as to the point of making us both palatable for the U.S. appetite and desirous of a Pan-American union at all levels, without any procreative consequences. U.S. media machinery, such as Hollywood, tended to "homoeroticize" us into a corner, or at least it crossdressed and/or crossgendered us, their amigos and their amigas, into a degenerate subservience. What Hollywood was not counting on was that its patriarchal advocates were not homoeroticizing us into a permanent corner, but rather into a transient closet, and that, in turn, their libidinal invasion strategy had an unsuspecting result. In "degenerating" Latins into gender and sexual subservience, they were also creating libidinal monsters who could entice gringos into transgendering or sexually transgressing postures. The Self coming together with the Other spelled gender trouble, under the guise of being a fictional experience limited by cartoon or cartoon-like exchanges as reel rather than real danger.

In Disney's Pan-American fantasy, Latinos and Americanos wanted not only to have but also to be had; while Latinas and Americanas wanted to have, not just to

be had. Thus, to a certain extent, the libidinal sphere of the anti-nazi justified a different sort of right-wing politics: a relentless U.S.-centered, colonially inspired Pan-American union that eroticized the cooperation between the U.S. haves and the Latin American have-nots coming into a two-way embrace. The embrace is not always heterosexual. On the contrary, at least in the realm of the reel, U.S. colonial domination is often-times ensured by this country presuming that there are no "real" men or women South of their Border, only Latin targets of the American libido.

In spite of the perilous balancing of genders to suit the colonial fantasy, the colonizers' libidinization of the colonized went hand in hand with a paradoxical process of gender investment that assumed gender-reinventing — some would say gender-reversing. Such a process combined investing the desired target with wild and dependent qualities, a mixture of seductive danger and desire to be hugged, not to mention a daring cross-referencing of maleness and femaleness that, to maximize its titillating effect, would threaten to acquire a life of its own. The process questions the very patriarchal imperialism that it cosmetically upholds — as already suggested by Black, Mattelart, Dorfman, Enloe, and Burton. But the presumably U.S.-male-serving feminization and infantilization of the Other as wild, dependent, colonial subject, retains a fruit-throbbing bitch, a la Carmen et al., as the perfect role model.

Arguably an untraditional problem for the Disney-endorsed, traditional image of the colonizer is that sometimes Carmen is a man, or acts like one. And that man is not always the prototype of the colonized. Sometimes Carmen "Carmenizes" the colonizer, or challenges him with a male-like form of female aggression. Her brand of passive/ passionate core, as well as defensive/ offensive aggression, is likely intended to mock and disarm the imperial Duck. My fantasy is that Carmen remains perfectly capable of her own independent passion and offensive campaign of self-assertion and defies most homosexual panics, at least within the privacy of the (or my own) screening room. Furthermore, maybe Carmen and I do not choose to be reactive, but are instead given no choice by the circumstances in which Hollywood coined, cornered, and filmed her, or the U.S. labels me. Her revenge is seducing me, as one of her many voyeuristic viewers and reviewers, into believing that I am seducing her, or using her as my role model and platform of revenge.

Carmen is the tip of the U.S. trans(en)gendering Latin iceberg. There are other "hot-headed" Latinos and Latinas ready to take over Carmen and melt the Pan-American ice es-capades. But whereas she embodies the virgin/ whore male/ female quota, with surprising ease, her male counterparts remain largely split between two forms of testosterone poisoning: lethargy or hysteria, in the vein of the *siesta* under the *sombrero* (*mañana* syndrome) sort of man and the Speedy Gonzalez prototype of senseless activity. Both choices converge in irremediable impotence (particularly toward conquering outsiders, or even bitchy insiders=—such as Carmen).

For those South of the Border types like me who do not even qualify as senseless practitioners of machismo, the alternative is worse: we might become the hyperactive rivals of, and ineffectual losers to, the imperialistically prone American Dick. Disney actually offers two basic models for the hyperactive-loser types, rendered in the bird language of THE THREE CABALLEROS. On the one hand

there is Pablo the Penguin, who is hard-working but cold, slow to catch on (to) and to mate, but easy to catch off guard. On the other hand there is the *aracuã* (araquan), an Amazonian bird whose hysterical persona might have served to shape that of the Mexican mouse Speedy Gonzales — who fluctuates between the hyperpassive and the hyperactive mode.[17]

The third "macho" possibility, Panchito the Mexican Cock, who appears toward the end of the film, is not hyperactive, but his male strutting is unconvincing at best. [18] Non-"macho" male Latino activity is reduced to "much ado about nothing," or worse, the tabula rasa of the *lánguida y tropical siesta* under the *sombrero* and the "mañana syndrome" with which our "developing" economies — and in turn our "developing" or "third world" culture — have come to be associated.

Thus begins to emerge a Disney world producing a suggestive colonial mix and match of Latino/a and Anglo-american libidos on sale. But let us assess the subversive potential for gender freedom and sexual happiness, centering on Disney's model film for the seductive colonization of Latin America. To begin with, Carmen Miranda sometimes takes a strategically "theatrical" revenge against the consumers of her fruitiness. In *THE THREE CABALLEROS*, she assaults the Donald, shrinking him with heavy petting into a flattened dot on the pavement — which later "erects" into a standing but cautious and sensitive man. She also emerges as a blue-green cardboard image in a winning Statue of Liberty-like pose, momentarily paralyzing the Donald, who, at least for an instant, becomes an immigrant in need of a home port — thus empathizing with all of those other birds, from the Southernmost Pablo to the Northernmost Panchito dying to travel "upward" — perhaps to emigrate to the U.S..

As liberal whore and the virgin of liberty, Carmen's presence has devastating effects on the male birds. Carmen the woman also triumphs elsewhere: such as at the end of the film *COPACABANA*, where Groucho Marx (as an exaggerated version of a maleness-ducking American) and the leading man (the proto-macho gangster-manager-producer-owner Italo-American type) succumb to her nightclub "act." Unbeknownst to the nightclub owners she was hired to give a split performance: as a sinuous but virginal, high-class French chanteuse (Mlle. Fifi) and as a hip-twisting and proto-whorish Brazilian samba star (Carmen herself). In the end, this double performer is integrated into a single woman who, half Fifi and half Carmen, wins over the nightclubbing mob — just as in *THE THREE CABALLEROS* she is street vendor and statuesque diva rolled into one powerful lover girl. Eventually all of the men who come in contact with Carmen are Mirandized to a pulp by this gutsy Franco-Brazilian diva in Hollywood residence [see Figure 4].

The fruitful Latin woman's revenge on her ogling audience is also a feature of her male counterpart. Joe Carioca succeeds in dealing subversively with his Disney-sponsored audience. He Cariquizes Donald to a pulp, at times masculinizing and at times feminizing him, seducing or contaminating at will the self-appointed and all-consuming American Duck. One would think that after *THE THREE CABALLEROS* phenomenon was released to the world, Latin American bonding with the U.S. would never be the same, but U.S.-Latin American film games largely remained libidinally repressed by their audiences. Disney's films had a near perfect excuse for just such a repression: his work was ostensibly intended for children.

ON BECOMING AN AMERICAN

Arguably for Latin American of my parents' generation, the U.S. of the thirties and forties was, in comparison to the Nazis, a rather progressive invader. My parents and I did not know we had to provide the fruit and to become ourselves the fruits or the hard-working and soft-bodied fruity weavers of the U.S. Loom. I attribute my own initiation into American life and world history, from the platform of a small-town Cuban childhood, precisely to such a U.S. marketing strategy, and iconically to my viewing of the film *THE THREE CABALLEROS* and my self-conscious humming of the best-selling song, "We are the Three Gay Caballeros." The film and the song made it to my hometown sometime in the late forties — perhaps too late to light the first outbreak of Nazism, but not too late to encourage Cuba to join the U.S. fruit basket or to encourage me to take my first lesson in my Pan-American ideological and sexual education, not to mention gender consciousness. Donald was the first gringo "bird" to invade the national territory of my libido, one of many which, if Castro and my Father are right, mostly bring trouble to the locals.

My memories of the earliest period of the anti-nazi campaign and of personal development remain cartoon and song-and-dance-like images orchestrated by three gay caballeros sanctioned by the Disney label. I was also heterosexually mystified by the blurry sight of bathing beauties lying like half-dressed sardines on the beach in Acapulco onto which Disney torpedoes the barely manly Ugly Duckling of a hero (pantless, feathered, and penisless — but not penniless). The "real" women in the cartoon, however, tease our Duckey of a dick in a sadomasochistic "hide and seek" ritual which ends when the Donald shows signs of enjoying it [see Figure 5]. Who was I rooting for?

Disney scenes and questions relate to other filmed scenes and personal/ social questions. Before the TV monopoly, films were a crucial way to gain an international conscience, and for me, and I suspect many other small-town children, a favorite medium and model to judge a given culture's position in the world order. Films habitually presented such a position in terms of libidinal quotas and gender empathies.

To complete the dizzying Disneying of my conscience, I remember my excitement and subsequent soul/ gender empathy search upon viewing *FLYING DOWN TO RIO*. In this film blonde female beauties fly over Copacabana beach doing acrobatics on the wing of a ("Pan American"?) plane for a group dominated by foreign and local men at the mercy of these cloud-bound, intrepid performers, who in turn are both at the mercy of a Hollywood producer. The white suits and white skins, the flowery and deflowered women, heat and swaying palms put generalizing ideas into my head. This Hollywood flying-down-to-Rio fantasy could be my own town's and my own: a whitewashed generic land of tropical languor spiked by sex.

Whether the men and/or the women are languorously and/or dangerously laid out on the beach — as in Disney's case — or perilously laid out on the wings of a plane or being an spectator on the side wings — as in Hollywood's case — our imagination had a choice: to play along or to play a trick on the colonial flight of the imagination. And vis-a-vis that colonial choice it hardly mattered whether we acted as women or as men.

The biggest U.S. fear is losing the war of seduction — which remains the ultimate of conquests: to convince someone that she or he should want to be under our control. The fear of losing oneself in that seduction, of losing control of the terms of seduction, overwhelms the U.S. fear of a Latin American sedition to the Nazi cause. In fact the politics of seduction feed on that of dependency: as the seduced becomes dependent on the seduction, with the delusion of sharing power in the transitory horizontal equality of the sexual union. Of course Latin America is not the sole seduced — and arguably passified, conquered, and "effeminized"/ "infantilized" — partner. Disney and the rest of the propaganda machine seduce the insiders, the U.S. public at large, into believing that they are "on top" of the world.

DUCKING COLUMBUS

THE THREE CABALLEROS is framed as a series of packages sent by an undetermined number of "amigo" birds to their long-distance feathered cousins in the United States. The main amigos, Joe Carioca the Brazilian parrot and plain Panchito the Mexican cock, complete the trio of hot male birds that gives the film its title. To my surprise, the Caribbean is only subliminally alluded to by these model birds who share the generic heat of the Américas South of the U.S. border (and consequently the Hispanic/ Latino immigrant within the U.S. border). The Américas become not only a bird nest of male-bonding but a series of Southern hospitality gifts to Mr. Donald Duck, a much-deserving Northern explorer and defender of birddom or anthropologist and mourner of bird doom.

The sequences of the cartoon unwrap as a repeat voyage of discovery. Donald not only "unwraps" but also "enters" the packages, taking trips which, in a sense, become cyclical forms of repayment. His excuse for the visit is the packaged invitation which is an open-ended icon of the real (or reel) thing: Latin America itself. The Duck interprets such an invitation as a summons to "help out" — at least to service the essential needs of the natives. These seductive needs are coated, sundae-like, in thick sugar syrup with plenty of nuts. Indeed the U.S. has been seeking just such invitations to visit us, solve our misery, share our fun, and stay on terribly long vacations. Just like Columbus, Donald takes four trips that present themselves in increasingly larger packages on the occasion of his birthday, on Friday the 13th.

The U.S. bird's first voyage of discovery, which comes wrapped in a tiny package, contains a Latin American excuse for a film camera demanding to film Pablo, Donald's penguin alter ego, who doubles as the rarest of South American amigos. The film puts Donald in charge of the camera, and thus of the situation. The Duck shows off his skill and *simpatico* attitude toward his subject matter by building his equipment before our very eyes. He throws the gift reels into the air — to the sound of a tropical percussive melee — and they become a camera, a film, a geopolitical action? Even a duck can become a purveyor of an illusion that goes by the name of technical progress.

The politically repressive, but also libidinally repressed, Duck's curiosity takes him to the southernmost realm of the *Aves Rares*, which appears as a sign — orally translated into English as "Strange Birds," that is, his Latin American "cousins." Pablo is the target of inquiry, a soul-searching penguin among dumb penguins, who seeks to know the world or, should I say, the U.S. view of the world. After many unsuccessful attempts — marked by his failing traveling machinery — he

manages to sail northward, bypassing the ancient Andean civilizations that only show up as colonial postcard types of resorts: Viña del Mar is "carded" instead of its counterpart, the land of the ancient araucanos. A touristy view of Lima and Quito replaces the land of the Incas and the like.

After a touch-and-go side trip to Juan Fernández Island (still run by the ghost of Robinson Crusoe) Pablo arrives in the Galapagos, where he comes to terms in his own way with Darwin's evolutionary theories, The Penguin melts into a vacationland lethargy under his newfound *sombrero*. He incarnates a feathered missing link with anthropomorphic primate potential as he squeezes the peel of a golden banana into the air, to pop the white pulp into his eager mouth. Donald just provides Pablo with a "technical" opportunity to discover him, or what is the same, the Darwinian animal/ cultural pyramid peaking in grade "A" U.S. culture. Just like Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro, the Antarctic penguins are like other natives — in the Caribbean, Meso America, and Andean America, respectively — who anticipate the colonizers' arrival by attempting to reach them with all their might. As Pablo fulfills the Darwinian prophecy of the descent of man — or should we say the descent of duck — the film jumps to the next package, which is slightly larger in size, and it should be harder for the audience to swallow.

The second trip, to the Amazon, is packaged in proto-Western mythological wraps. The strings attached take viewers from an Amazon iconized, even in the forties, as the last Euro-American hope to recover the ecological earthly paradise. This pristine forest ready for commerce offers the Donald an anthropologizing ornithologist paradise, a kind of bird predawn of technology, where birds act out as tools — such as the scissor bird. The Latin American post-European myth of this second trip ends up at the heart of South America's own lost pampa. Disney's approximation of this landscape is by way of a winged donkey and his Gauchito (with a wide-eyed cherubic "take-me-take-me" plaintive look) played against a heritage of both Pegasus and Europa being swept away by a bull. This Uruguayan boy prototype and his Euro-mythical beast become an inseparable pair ready to heat the primitive system. They enter a horse race, favorite pastime of these parts, which showcases the natives' cowboy skills at a disadvantage to Euro-American ingenuity.

For the Disney Studio, the second Uruguayan passion must be boys mating with donkeys, something which is suggested at different "cloudy" levels — or literally by the appearance of an ominous cloud where some behind-the-scene activity takes place. Perhaps the top clouded surprise presents Gauchito and his donkey's rump inside a thunderous cloud, from which the presumed horseman, or should I say donkeyman, emerges and coquettishly wonders, "who's the boss?" This love and power struggle is further underlined by another cloud scene, from which Gauchito emerges sheepishly holding the donkey's tail, which the commentator assesses as a "jockeying for position." The odd skills of this Gaucho and his donkey mate win them the jackpot for the race. And yet, the beast displays its wings and thus its own and the Gaucho's winning trick by flirting effeminately with a bird high or a pole.

The third packaged trip opens into a dancing book of "magic realism" manned, as it were, by Joe Carioca, who invites the Donald to Bahia, black capital of Brazil. However, Joe's throbbing book's Bahia is not Afro-Brazilian as it should be, but a red blob of white paired items — ranging from palm trees to love birds, to boats, to

a candy-selling, swaying woman (Carmen complete with a modest turban — *sîm furitas* — and make-up that makes her look like Annette Funicello in the *Mickey Mouse Club*) accompanied by minstreling chorus boys (looking like Franco-American gay-hip gondolieri in straw hats, striped T-shirts, and tight toreador pants). Evidently Brazilian humanity is too much for a mere secondhand view of the scene through cartoons or a single country.

The multinational Brazilian loving, music, and dancing are thick as molasses and transparent as a transgendered message. Joe seduces Donald into a slow samba [see Figure 4]. The tropic neither separates the boys from the girls, nor does it unite them, but it rather hyperfeminizes and hypermasculinizes seemingly at random. Dangerously (en)gendered super-women/ fruits like Carmen and supermen/ birds, like the speeded-up araquan bird, succeed in derailing the samba and the train trips to the hot heart of Bahia. The former does it by Carmenizing, i.e. transgendering, everyone in sight to her canned-samba beat; the latter, by literally drawing away the rail lines (again in a so-so Disney proto-sample of "magic realism" and a novel view of the commercial Latino Boom). Eventually Brazil drowns its in a testoteroned travesty of sisterhood (under the aegis of male imitations of the image of Carmen many times multiplied). This leads Donald to have a hot and humid dream lubricated by Joe Carioca's and his own Carmen impersonations.

Once again, the transient softening effect of the feminized tropics is counteracted by the equally transient hardening of Latino men dancing/ fighting as cocks engaged in *capoeira*, the Afro-Brazilian martial art. The transnational, transgendered, even transsexual, phantasy book finally closes on them, even though Joe manages to pull Donald away by his tail. Donald has been squashed into a little sailor hat with legs (which mimics the dreamy siesta under the sombrero), but he manages to erect himself back into full-blooded American duckhood. At this point he has an image crisis: the animated film has him splitting into a kaleidoscope of amigo, and less than amigo, personae.

The fourth voyage comes packaged in an enormous box that yields a three-cornered piñata and eventually a tour of Mexico guided by Panchito, dressed as a *charro* cock who sweeps the other birds into a magic serape trip/ trick. Donald remains a somewhat frustrated voyeur of what is given as Mexico's main sights — all of them mestizo feasts with a colonial bias: native beaches, dances, Christmas traditions and nightlife. Mexicans, rendered as kitschy divas, do their coquettish folklore, hacked by pusillanimous male accompaniment. The American hero gets into the act only as he circles Acapulco, armed with a retractable telescope that bristles at the sight of a seductively pale bunch of sun-screened señoritas. He dives into the scene and plays along with the Mexicanas' sadomasochistic game, until the señoritas run away. The "wolf in duck's clothing," proclaimed by the film, is challenged by a woman daring him, in untranslated Mexican-accented Spanish: "ándale, patito, ven!" (dare, *patito* — sissy?—come!) In the Caribbean and elsewhere "pato" implies "gay" and/or "sissy."

Finally Mexico offers him the romantically threatening female heads of star flowers and all sorts of love-me/ love-me-not petals scattered at his feet and ready to make him slip — as if these petals were the peels of Carmen's bananas, or the wrappers of homemade candies sold on the pulsating streets of Bahia. Donald eventually

becomes one of the flowers and tries to kiss, in lesbian fury, one of the real ladies' corollas, to no avail [see Figure 1]. The flowers transform themselves into female cacti, whose lead is a charita (echo of Panchito). Panchita, as I have come to call her, whips Donald into final submission.[19] And he likes it [see Figure 5]. Donald then plays the bull — a paper bull at that — in an improvised corrida where Joe Carioca and Panchito take turns playing the killing *matador* and the pricking *banderillero*. Donald gets it from both ends, and again he likes it — after all, Uncle Walt is looking over his shoulder, and ours.

As observed by Julianne Burton, Donald's bullfighting scene represents a kind of outpouring of traditional macho behavior aimed to counteract any lingering interpretation of his amigo-bonding as amorous advances (Burton, pp. 35-36). What I would consider Donald's hypermacho "homosexual panic" is counteracted by Panchito's "ironic voice-over," to the tune of: "like brother to brother/ we're all for each other" (Burton, p. 36). This slogan contrasts with the earlier climax of the gay caballero's song: "friends though we may be / When some Latin baby / Says yes, no or maybe / Each man is or himself" (quoted by Burton, p.22). In the Pan-American pursuit of a "united states of being," Donald has thrown all caution to the wind; he has become one of/with us Latin birds, perhaps a subversive *pájaro* in his own right.

SALVE COLUMBUS

In fact Donald Duck did discover América, an America written and pronounced with a specific diacritical mark and pronounced with some sort of an accent, a subversively gendered and sexed accent. Through a series of well-packaged voyages, the magic of Disney presents us like children to a childlike world of unity and progress in which men are less than men and women are more than women. The packaging of the voyages is clever: it almost fooled me into believing that I was among the Latinos who had contributed something to the continental mass of the forever-new New World. I am referring to the packages sent by my fellow birds to that plastic Duck of the North, which contained — as you might recall:

1. A tiny box from which emerges a rhythmically improvised Latino ingenuity which lends an improvisatory hand to Donald's film equipment, and through which we witness a penguin version of a cold-blooded land South of the Border.
2. A medium-sized box from which emerges a mythical Pegasus/ Europa's bull, folklorized, updated, and rendered into a shrew, that is, a flying donkey whose gaucho partner hides his wings.
3. The next-size-up box turns out to be a three-dimensional book complete with a crooning Brazilian parrot with a proto-Speedy-González sidekick who leads a song-and-dance Brazilian tour.
4. The biggest of the boxes reveals a three-cornered piñata which breaks to reveal a Pandora's box of seaside beauties, religious folklore, flowering paradises, and electrified Latino performances.

The seduction of the gifts eventually threatens the gender and sexual core of the ducking voyager with "United States" in mind. The four Columbian voyages of discovery retold by Disney transform the Donald. Such gift-wrapped voyages, like Columbus's own, might confuse an audience of children and naive buyers but challenge an adult audience with a desire for transatlantic exchanges. In the first

trip the Duck plays the hot bird to the cold-blooded penguins at the edge of "progress." In the second, he learns a new Latino trick in male bonding and love of animals at the euro-mythical edge of the pampas. In the third, Donald dances with a "wolf" or two in parrot clothing, succumbing to the transgendered word and world of the Brazilian wild. By the end of the fourth and final trip, the caballeros gaily impersonate Pan-American unity.

The film ends with an orgasmic Pan-American night of fireworks, enjoyed in unison by the bird trio. Joe the parrot and Panchito the cock cozy up to the middle man, Donald the duck, who is dressed up as a madonna in a serape. Disney's *pietà* is superficially convincing and profoundly pitiful, but a faithful representation of the transgendering effects of mixing apples and oranges, Latinos/as and Americano/as, in a Christian communion of commercial proportions and surprising gender disruption and libidinal eruption. Indeed the Donald has survived a Pan-American war of gender, sex, and fireworks, nothing quite comparable to World War II or, for that matter, World War III.

"Oh no, Donald, don't do that!"

— Joe Carioca, in THE THREE CABALLEROS, after receiving a warm abrazo and kiss on the cheek. [See figure 6]

"Mister, don't eat the bananas."

— Lyrics of a Cuban-American song composed and sung by Chirino.

BANANA BOAT SONG

Besides Christopher Columbus's New World voyages aboard the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, I retain Walt's twentieth-century voyages of discovery aboard THE THREE CABALLEROS as a controversial model of my own exile and critical "arrival" on the U.S. academic scene. The very impurity and injustices of these voyages provide motivation and justification, but also consolation and compromise, for my own modestly transcultural, transgendered, and transexual "revenge" on the Western discourse and Made-in-the-U.S. macho image both of which I am marginally a part. What I hope with my critical "banana boat song" is not necessarily to prevent — or, for that matter, to encourage — any Mister's touching of my people's bananas (elaborating on Chirino's lyrics in the epigraph), but to use to Latin American advantage whatever the Donald did, unconsciously or wickedly, in the name of a U.S. brand of liberation. I could even add to the Donald's own U.S.-manipulated hope for us my own discreet postcolonial traces of libidinal freedom. I wish the Donald's and my own literary "nephews" would listen, pick up, and open up the subliminal meaning of a true Pan-American union and relative freedom for all. Perhaps the reading public should take their own cruise of discovery in that most unusual of love boats:

"I shall leave this letter on a twig, hoping that it will be seen and picked up by some passing riverboat. Now I shall beat my way out of here across the swamps and brush. Nothing will stop me till I reach civilization."

"Good-by (I am running out of berry juice), Your Uncle Donald."

NOTES

1. This article has a more "personal" companion piece, "Donald Duck Discovers the Americas," to appear in Portuguese translation in the journal *Lusitania*. I am grateful to Kate Bloodgood for her editorial and contextual comments on both articles.
2. George Black. *The Good Neighbor: How the United States Wrote the History of Central America and the Caribbean*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, p. 69.
3. Somoza refers to Anastasio, Nicaragua's dictator. See Black, 71.
4. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart. *How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialist Ideology of the Disney Comic*. David Kunzle, trans. New York: International General, 1971, p.3.
5. As José Martí and other Latin American freedom fighters have called the U.S.
6. For a film view of this sterilization campaign, consult Ana María García's *LA OPERACIÓN* (1980) which documents the position of Puerto Rican leaders, such as Rubén Berrio and Juan Mari Bras, before the United Nations' inquiry into U.S.-sponsored Caribbean sterilization. I am grateful to Margarita Ostolaza Bey for this information.
7. The book *Conquest of the Tropics*, published by Doubleday in 1914, is a good documentary source to study the U.S. commercial bananization/ banalization of Latin America.
8. For Disney's own politics, first pro-Hitler and then anti-nazi, including his wartime propaganda films, such as *VICTORY THROUGH AIR POWER*, see David Kunzle's introduction to *How to Read Donald Duck*, pp. 11-21. See note 2 for the publication information on *Good Neighbor* — I am grateful to Ofelia Ferrán for bringing this book to my attention.
9. For a background on this subject consult the following texts. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases, Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1990. Julianne Burton, "Don (Juanito) Duck and the Imperial-Patriarchal Unconscious: Disney Studios, the Good Neighbor Policy, and the Packaging of Latin America," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Eds. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yager, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 22-41. Ana M. López, "Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism," in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, pp. 404-424.
10. When Kunzle quotes from the reaction to Disney's forties features by a contemporary as "gay dreams of holocaust," he gives the term "gay" its present-day homosexual overtones (See Dorfman and Mattelart, p. 19, and Richard Shickle's *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*, 1968, p. 233). I would agree with his veiled suggestion of the connection between Disney's tongue-in-cheek view of international doom and a free-for-all Latin American wave

of love, including homosexuality. Indeed homosexuality becomes attached to the notion of dubious entertainment and valid escape valve in times of a world-wide holocaust,

11. Dorfman and Mattelart argue Disney's subliminal pansexual masturbatory fantasy disguised as an asexual world policed by the Salvation Army, in Chapter I of their work, entitled "Uncle, Buy me a Contraceptive," pp. 33-40 — see particularly pp. 38-39

12. Burton herself, p. 23, sets the tone to study the homosexual undertone: "THE THREE CABALLEROS...indulges its audience in scenes of cross-dressing and cross-species coupling, of latent sexual punning and predation." [See figure 6]

13. There are records of national protests against such films. See Burton, p. 23, who refers to Allen L. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1980)

14. Joe Carioca made brief appearances earlier on, in *SOUTH OF THE BORDER WITH DISNEY* (1941) and *SALUDOS AMIGOS!* (1943).

15. A book written by H. Marion Palmer and illustrated by The Walt Disney Studio. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company. 1945. I thank Amalia Gladhart for bringing this book to my attention.

16. Miami: Pretty Boy Publishing Co., 1991.

17. Burton, p.37, finds a "Miranda-esque" quality in the araquan bird's "song."

18. I grew up addressing male genitalia as "Panchito" — no other same-age native informants from my hometown were available for comment.

19. See, as added evidence of the transgendering, Burton's comments on the dance of the phallic cacti, p. 34.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Hot and spicy

by Christopher Ortiz

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In her essay, "A Long Line of Vendidas," Cherríe Moraga states,

"Sexuality, race, and sex have usually been presented in contradiction to each other, rather than as part and parcel of a complex web of personal and political identity and oppression" (109).

Moraga and other lesbian feminists continue to be some of the only voices within the Chicano/a and Latino/a communities to explore the connections between what it means to be Chicana/Latina and lesbian in the U.S. today.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] The work of these writers deals with the various contradictions that they experience as Chicanas/ Latinas and lesbians: their need to articulate their lesbian identities within and from their cultures which often marginalize and censure them; and the silence and invisibility they face within a Eurocentric gay and lesbian movement and feminist movement. In their project of self-representation, Moraga and other Chicana/ Latina lesbians observe that the struggle for empowerment by people of color often ignores the question of sexuality and sexual difference. And they note that the gay and lesbian and feminist movements relegate race and ethnicity to a secondary consideration or assume that racism will be eliminated through the achievement of civil and sexual equality.

In comparison to the work of Chicana and Latina lesbians, Chicano and Latino gay men have been surprisingly silent in articulating the political and personal meaning of their cultural and sexual identities.[2] Although Moraga addresses herself to the lesbian experience, her project of self-representation (and that of other Chicanas and Latinas) can be viewed as a political challenge to gay Chicano and Latino men and as a necessary context for the latter's own project:

"Coming from such a complex and contradictory history of sexual exploitation by white men and from within our own race, it is nearly earth-shaking to begin to try and separate the myths told about us from the truths; and to examine to what extent we have internalized what, in fact, is not true" (118).

In analyzing the representation of Chicano and Latino men in gay pornography, my project here is one whose impetus comes from Moraga's understanding within the framework of Chicana and Latina cultural experience in the U.S. — that a consideration of sexuality is essential for any construction of identity and political

analysis. It is also a response to a need I see for a more thorough and systematic discussion among Chicano and Latino gay men of how our sexuality and the meanings we give it position us culturally and politically within our communities and within the hegemonic discourse of gay and lesbian liberation movements in the United States.

One way in which this study attempts to begin to address the question of how we represent our own identity and desire and how our identity and desire position us politically is to look at various widely circulated images in "gay" culture that attempt to construct a discourse on Chicano and Latino gay sexuality.[3] In some ways the theoretical focus of my analysis is to critique the way in which the white or European-American male has been constructed as the universal subject of gay identity. A critique of this subject is a way in which we can begin to address our own desire and articulate our own experience of being Chicano/Latino and gay.[4] A critique of this type begins to address Moraga's call for an exploration of the "complex and contradictory history" of our relation to a dominant discourse which often functions to oppress and to define us and which in many ways some of us have internalized.

In his essay, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," video artist Richard Fung describes the situation for gay men of color in these terms:

"The 'ghetto', the mainstream gay movement, can be a place of freedom and sexual identity. But it is also a site of racial, cultural, and sexual alienation sometimes more pronounced than in straight society. For me sex is a source of pleasure, but also a site of humiliation and pain" (159).
[5]

Fung succinctly articulates the dilemma that many gays of color face. They not only have to come to terms with the cultural and gender expectations of their own communities' expectations which are often at odds with a gay self-identification and which in some cases produce homophobia — but they also encounter the stereotypes and racism of a European-American gay community, which has hitherto seemed by its hegemony and visibility to speak as and for all gays and to define culturally what it is to be gay-identified. For groups such as African Americans, Native Americans and Chicanos/ Latinos, this situation is often made more difficult by factors of class and linguistic difference.

Underlying the question of political, ethnic and often class hegemony raised by people of color vis-à-vis the gay movement is the issue of cultural and racial hegemony in the construction of identity and sexual desire. In this sense, gays of color find themselves in the proverbial place between a rock and a hard place: between the lack of culturally circulated images in their own communities which represent their sexual desire and ethnic specificity as negotiable and desirable; and those hegemonic representations of a gay and lesbian identity in which they cannot find a point of identification. In the construction of a political praxis, a necessary and important project is the simultaneous interrogation and investigation of hegemonic representations that act as structures of desire for Chicano/ Latino men — even when many of those representations either exclude or reinscribe them in dominant hierarchies of race and class — and the creation of images that will encompass affirmatively and critically sexual desire and ethnic specificity.

As contemporary film theory and especially psychoanalytic approaches have pointed out in its various articulations of desire and sexual difference, visual representation often acts as a phantasmatic space in which a society creates an imaginary set of relations by which it defines itself and produces knowledge. Thus, visual representation is an ideological project which operates within a number of often differing and seemingly contradictory discourses. For U.S. gay culture, pornography acts as an important and often defining discourse on sexual desire and identity. Pornographic film and video provide a means for the circulation of sexual images among a broad number of men who engage in same-sex activity.

Although a small portion of the market in comparison to overall production, more gay pornographic films and videos that feature Chicano/ Latino men have been produced in the last ten years.[6] As a means to interrogate and investigate hegemonic representations that act as structures of desire for many gay men, I would like to analyze the image of the Chicano/ Latino man in three pornographic videos. An analysis of these images will explore the way in which they position Chicanos/ Latinos within a larger field of cultural and social discourses on race, ethnicity and sexuality.

The gay pornographic videos that feature prominently in the market are of two types. The first type pairs Chicano/ Latino and black men together in some combination. The second features only Chicano/ Latino men. In a few of the second type, some white men appear at least in one episode. Many of the videos come with titles like BOYS FROM THE BARRIO, parts 1 and 2; HOOKED ON HISPANICS; RAUNCHY RICANS; LATINO MEN; LA CUCARACHA; BLACK ALLEY: SOUTH OF THE BORDER; LOS HOMBRES; LATIN MEN HARD AT WORK; LATIN LEATHER; LATIN LOVERS; PORTRAIT OF A PUERTO RICAN; POSTCARDS FROM THE BARRIO; BOYS BEHIND BARS, parts 1, 2, and 3. The locations where the scenarios unfold are, to name only a few, prisons, warehouses, restaurants, kitchens and urban areas that are defined as Chicano/ Latino neighborhoods. The three videos that will be analyzed demonstrate the way in which Chicano/ Latino men are framed as objects of desire within already culturally familiar codes.

SOUL AND SALSA (1988, produced and directed by Frank Jeffries, Adam and Co.). As the title suggests, African American and Chicano/ Latino men are linked to familiar signifiers such as soul and salsa. What the terms denote have both a cultural and sexual meaning not only within the video but within a wider social context. African American men have more soul, commonly thought of as passion, "rhythm," and emotional depth. Chicano/ Latino men are framed in terms of salsa, a type of music or a dish that is stereotypically linked to Latinos and often becomes a way Chicano/ Latino culture is reduced to a simple meaning. In fact, the juxtaposition of soul and salsa reduces African American and Chicano/ Latino men to easily consumed objects within an already familiar signifying system of racial and ethnic meaning: soul food, soul music; salsa with chips, salsa music, hot-blooded men with passion, rhythm, strong sexual appetite, and a closeness to the primal.[7]

The cover for the video frames the men directly in these terms:

"Hot and Spicy! Adam and Co. brings you a gourmet feast for men who

like to sweat while they eat. The finest Black and Latin men are brought to you on a platter, warmed and ready to eat."

Within the system of racial and ethnic meaning that the title of the video signifies is the implicit idea that the relationship of the African American and Chicano/ Latino to nature is not as mediated or that the latter's culture is constructed closer to the natural or the primal. According to the cover description of the video's contents, African American and Latino men are both the raw and the cooked.

In line with the idea of the African American and Chicano/ Latino as a cipher for an unbridled sexuality or for a pure sexual presence is the video's *mise-en-scène*. The five scenarios of the video take place in two settings: a bed placed in an unspecified locale with gray matting, similar to a photographer's studio; and in the indoor construction site of a partially constructed room. The bed that is not part of a recognizable setting reduces African American men and Chicano/ Latino men to their sex. The partially constructed room reinforces the notion of men of color as somehow not completely civilized.⁸

Many pornographic films and videos have some narrative structure that can be followed in between the sexual encounters: boy comes to big city and learns the pleasures of gay sex; young men on a college football team have sexual liaisons; traveling businessmen do more than sell their products, etc. There are some gay pornographic texts that are constructed only by sexual encounters within a fantasy scenario, but many of these have some sort of identifiable locale or point of consciousness which can be traced as the origin of the fantasy represented. There is also gay pornography that identifies itself by the type of act that is performed. This act becomes the rationale for the contents. Titles such as *MEN WHO TAKE IT UP THE ASS*, *FORESKIN FANTASY* and *CLOSE SHAVE* (sexual encounters that center on body shaving) are types within this genre of gay pornography.^[9]

We can situate *SOUL AND SALSA* within the pornographic convention of the film or video that is composed only of sexual scenarios within a fantasy structure. But unlike the conventional fantasy scenario of the young man reading a gay porn magazine and fantasizing himself performing particular sexual acts, the fantasy structure implicit in the title and the promotional material is that of race and ethnicity. The text, then, is structured so that the fantasy is not only that of watching men perform specific sexual acts with each other, but that the spectator watches racially coded men — African American and Chicano/ Latino men — engage in sexual acts with one another. The text provides an idea of what sex between hot men of color might possibly look like.

Three of the video's scenarios take place in the unidentified locale and the last two in the indoor construction site. Two of the scenarios are purely masturbatory with only one model. The first scenario opens with a black man masturbating on the bed. While the first man masturbates, another black man enters the frame from the right side, and they begin to engage in sexual relations.

In many gay and pornographic films and videos, the reality principle is at work: an identifiable location such as someone's bedroom or office. Already the *mise-en-scène* codes the first encounter as a place of pure sexuality, that is without any structuring narrative or point of origin for the fantasy, as stated earlier. In the first scenario, there are no point of view shots which would establish some

identification with the men in the encounter. These types of point of view shots are often frequent in gay pornography: one character looking at another in anticipation of fucking or getting fucked and then a corresponding reverse shot. The men in this scenario are on display, and the spectator is placed in a position outside the frame in terms of identification.

Many gay pornographic texts provide a point of entry into the text for the spectator, either through narrative structure or point of view shots, so that the spectator can imagine himself one or the other of the characters. In *SOUL AND SALSA*, no such structures of identification exist within the text, although an African American or Chicano/ Latino man might identify on the basis of his ethnic identity. But the coding of the images places this spectator in a problematic subject position in relation to larger social questions of power and the representation of race and ethnicity. A white man can identify in terms of his desire for either the Black or Chicano/ Latino men in the text, but the identification is based on a power dynamic of race and ethnicity: the desire to fuck Black and Chicano/ Latino men or the desire to be fucked by them.

Of the five scenarios presented, there are two masturbation solos with Black men, and three encounters between: two black men; a Chicano/ Latino man and white man; and a three-way between two black men and a Chicano/ Latino man. There is mutual reciprocation except for the scenario with the Chicano/ Latino man and white man. This scenario features Roberto Arias, a porn model who has appeared in mainstream gay pornography, and takes place in the undefined locale. It opens with the white man fellating Roberto Arias, who then proceeds to fuck him. There are no point of view shots. Instead, from the opening moments of the scenario, Roberto Arias and his penis become the focal point of attention.

At one point when Arias is fucking the white man, he and the white man are framed obliquely so that the spectator views the activity from the same direction or perspective as the white man being penetrated. There are two possible readings of this scenario. The first is that a Black or Chicano/ Latino spectator can substitute himself for the white man; the text presents at least one point of identification. Also as part of the first reading, the scenario represents a white man being penetrated by a Chicano/ Latino, representing the latter as active and dominant sexually, thus reversing power relations at least on the level of fantasy.

A second possible reading would take the first into account but would claim that providing a point of identification and role reversal are not inconsistent with the racial and ethnic codes that are at work in *SOUL AND SALSA*. One pervasive stereotype in gay pornography is the desire to be fucked by the Black or Chicano/ Latino stud who does not reciprocate and may even be straight. Interestingly, this stereotype concurs with a Chicano/ Latino cultural idea of the homosexual as the penetrated partner in a sexual relationship between two men.

The fantasy of the straight macho Chicano/ Latino man who fucks "me" (a white man) allows for sexual relations between two men and at the same time excludes the Chicano/ Latino man from being framed as a member of a gay community. For a Chicano/ Latino spectator, the identification can be a problematic one if he is attempting to articulate a sexual experience that may not conform to or may even transgress his own familiar cultural codes: *macho-chingado*/ top-bottom.[10] The white man can divorce himself from the cultural and ethnic implications for the

Chicano/ Latino of this fantasy scenario; the Chicano/ Latino man cannot.[11]

In the last scenario, a three way encounter between a Chicano/ Latino man and two Black men, the question of race and ethnicity come to problematize spectator identification as in the aforementioned case. In this encounter, which takes place in the indoor construction site, a Chicano/ Latino guy enters the frame, watches a Black guy engaged in construction work and begins to rub his crotch. The Black guy is shown initially from the Chicano/ Latino guy's point of view, but the point of view is disrupted by the camera angle. We see the Latino guy look; and in place of a normal eyeline match, we see the Black man from a high angle shot. Thus, the spectator's point of view is what becomes established in a complex relation to the role of the Chicano/ Latino man in the scenario.

The initial point of view shots in the scenario establish the Chicano/ Latino man as the spectator's point of identification. However, the break in the eyeline match shot allows the spectator to substitute himself for the Chicano/ Latino man and at the same time assume the "objective" position of the camera. The high angle shot establishes the spectator's position as dominant and not (always) equivalent to that of the Chicano/ Latino man. Although this provisional point of identification seems to provide a space for the Chicano/ Latino spectator, it denies the African American men within the scenario any point of view and seems to establish an implicit racial hierarchy. For a white spectator, the Chicano/ Latino man acts as a more acceptable provisional point of identification than an African American one. What this point of view affords the white spectator in terms of pleasure or fantasy is a question yet to be considered and one which cannot fully be addressed here.

This last scenario is the only one in which dialogue takes place. The Chicano/ Latino man tells the Black man that he is checking him out, and they then proceed to have sex. As the Black man is fellating him, the Chicano/ Latino man asks him "You've never had some Mexican before. Huh?" As the Black man continues to fellate him, the Chicano/ Latino man looks directly and seductively at the camera or the position of the spectator. The Chicano/ Latino guy's look is an invitation to knowledge, while his question is SOUL AND SALSA 's first direct reference to race and ethnicity. The ensuing sexual activity, then, is not just about men having sex with one another, but is also a purported knowledge of what Mexican dick is and what distinguishes it from other types of dick.

The scenario, however, provides no representation of Chicano/ Latino gay sexuality from the viewpoint of the Chicano/ Latino man, but functions to recode him as Other within existing dominant codes of race and ethnicity.[12] In this scenario, as in the other analyzed, the spectator of color is faced with a similar problem of identification. He can identify with the Latino/ Chicano man or Black men, but he must do so from what has been constructed by the text as a white man's fantasy. In this light, the overall structure of SOUL AND SALSA could be said to display its image of Black and Chicano/ Latino gay sexuality in a spectacle which produces its sexual pleasure through a reinscription of men of color in dominant codes of representation.

In contrast to SOUL AND SALSA, BLACK SALSA (1991, Hal Roth Production) literalizes the idea of Black and Chicano/ Latino gay sexuality as spectacle in its narrative and consciously mobilizes dominant discourses on race and ethnicity to produce its sexual meaning. BLACK SALSA's opening shots are of downtown Los

Angeles and an identifiably Latino neighborhood. The establishing shot is of a restaurant that serves burritos de cane asada and other items. A young Latino man enters the restaurant and is then interviewed by Vladimir Correa, who plays the owner of the restaurant.[13] By his accent and clothing, the young man, played by Angel del Rio, is obviously meant to represent an illegal alien.

At this point the video could possibly be blurring the lines between the fictional narrative and the actual situation many young illegal aliens. The young man says that he desperately needs a job and will do anything the owner asks. Vladimir Correa says that he has the job on a probationary basis and may be required to perform special duties for him and the two managers, one of whom is played by Eddie Valens.

In the first of five sexual scenarios, a young Chicano/ Latino guy and Black guy are cast in the roles of kitchen boys who start having sex with each other and as a result make a mess out of the kitchen. The two managers, one Chicano/ Latino and the other Black, discover the kitchen in disarray and then tell Angel del Rio to clean it up. They then order the new employee to suck their cocks, and proceed to fuck him roughly while they ask him if he likes his new job. The course of action in the second scenario is determined by the power differential between the managers and the new employee.

The third scenario is introduced with a superimposed title that informs the viewer that the time frame is the next day. The restaurant also provides a strip show in addition to serving food. Vladimir Correa introduces Chico, "the hottest stripper," to an audience that is composed almost entirely of people of color, except for one man who looks Italian and is coded as blue collar by the work clothes he wears. Chico, the black stripper, begins to do his number.

The framing device of Chico's performance is used as a means by which the audience watching him in fact becomes the show for the video's spectator. As the audience of the scenario watches Chico, they begin to become uncontrollably excited and oral activity begins. In a very controlled manner, the camera moves among the various dyads and triads that have formed between the men in the restaurant. The camera, which establishes the position of the spectator's gaze, places each of the men in the scenario under its scrutiny, providing no point-of-view shots.

Just as the title of SOUL AND SALSA acts upon the various meanings connoted in the words themselves and their juxtaposition, this video's title acts in the same way by having black modify salsa. All the various cultural and sexual connotations of "black" and "salsa" become enacted and literalized in the restaurant. Both Black and Chicano/ Latino men lose all civilized restraint in the face of the sexual; they become hot-blooded and their desire uncontrollable. The set location, a Mexican or Central American restaurant decorated with piñatas, and the ensuing activity all mobilize culture-based images of black and Chicano/ Latino sexuality which is put on display in an orgiastic spectacle. The idea of the sexuality of the Other as a spectacle or display is a common trope in the discourse of colonialism and imperialism, with the ethnic and racial specificity of the Other reduced to pure unbridled sexuality.

The last scenario I will discuss is the fourth one, which is introduced by the

intertitle, "Later by the stage door." In this scenario two of the audience members, a young Latino man and Black man, waylay Chico. They tell him that he has gotten them so hot and horny that they must have him and convince him to have sex with them in the alleyway by the stage door. This scenario contains the only immediately identifiable white man in the film. He watches the men engaged in sexual relations and consequently masturbates himself. The scenario is framed as his point of view. Just as the camera's point of view is dominant and establishes no specific identification with any of the performers in the previous scenario, so too does the camera establish the white man's (voyeuristic) gaze as dominant and strangely detached from the action, although he is masturbating.

The scenario raises again the issue of the problematic nature of the spectatorial position constructed for the spectator in the film. As stated earlier, a Black or Chicano/ Latino spectator could find a possible point of identification with the text's performers of color; however, he must do so from what has been constructed by the text as a subject position for a "white man's fantasy."^[14] This spectator would have difficulty divorcing himself from the text's representation of sexuality, a representation which mobilizes existing dominant codes of ethnic and racial difference as a means to place the Black and Chicano/ Latino man in the position of cultural and sexual Other.

Briefly, NOCHES LATINAS/ LATIN NIGHTS (1991, directed by Santiago Romero, Producer Bob Johnson, Latin Man Video) is the last text to be discussed. Latin Man Video is a production company which has produced a number of films and videos targeted at a market for Chicano/ Latino gay pornography. Santiago Romero has also directed this LATIN ON THE LOOSE for Latin Man Video. NOCHES LATINAS/ LATIN NIGHTS is important to mention in the context of this article, because the argument being made here is not an essentialist one. A Chicano/ Latino director of a gay porn video featuring Chicano/ Latino men will not necessarily produce a text whose erotic pleasure is free of stereotypes and racist images. I also do not think race and ethnicity are elements that should necessarily disappear from the erotic landscape of our imaginations, but rather I am analyzing the way in which current productions frame those elements so that they reinscribe the man of color in oppressive and dominant cultural representations of his sexuality.

Although the title of NOCHES LATINAS/ LATIN NIGHTS is bilingual, the video is directed at a non-Chicano/ Latino audience. The basic narrative structure of the video is that of the spectator observing various sexual scenarios that take place throughout the course of a night in the urban Los Angeles barrio. The intertitles provide the spectator with such information as:

"A hot-blooded sexual mist fills the air. It's one of those Latino Nights, when the guys from the barrio get tired of the bitches and go looking for a few good hard amigos."

The Chicano/ Latino men presented in the video, then, are not coded as queer-identified, but rather their sexual activity is part of male bonding and is attributable to a certain hegemonic notion of Chicano/ Latino machismo.

The intertitles continue to structure the various scenarios and inform the spectator that the city can offer him the possibility of a sexual encounter with a hot Latino:

"Some dare to cruise the Latino nights...knowing that anything might happen, because in the city at night, it's every man for himself. Especially on a hot Latino night in the barrio."

The video ends with this invitation to the spectator:

"A cold damp night in the city. It brings out the best in Latin guys. A point well worth remembering when you're alone one night in the city."

NOCHES LAT1NAS/ LATIN NIGHTS presents the Chicano/ Latino man in terms of the homeboy or street-smart and tough urban resident, an image of the Chicano/ Latino that is widely circulated in the dominant media. In this production, Chicano/ Latino sexuality is presented almost as a touristic excursion or urban adventure that is momentarily consumed and then forgotten. The Chicano/ Latino man's sexuality is reduced to class and racial Otherness; and thus his same-sex activity is framed as outside a notion of gay- or queer-identified desire. Although directed by a Chicano/ Latino man, NOCHES LATINAS/ LATIN NIGHTS constructs a representation of Chicano/Latino sexuality in similar problematic terms as in SOUL AND SALSA and BLACK SALSA. In a sense, "directed for" becomes more important; NOCHES LATINAS/ LATIN NIGHTS is directed for a particular market and that market's demand.

In order to place my textual analysis in a broader context of social issues, I would like to conclude with some general comments on how pornography is looked at in terms of gay cultural practice and what relation the present discussion has to Chicano/ Latino men as they undertake the politically necessary task of articulating and representing the question of identity in terms of their lived experience.

Pornography can be said to be an important artifact in popular gay male culture, and as such can be claimed to be fairly democratic in its availability to hegemonic and non-hegemonic gay male communities.[15] Precisely because gay pornography circulates so widely among those who engage in same-sex activity, it is often viewed in its best light as an almost utopic space of sexual liberation for the homoerotic representation of desire and as free of the aforementioned hierarchies.

As Robert Stam suggests, gay pornography's historical inscription contributes to this reading:

"Tom Waugh and others have spoken eloquently of the salutary role of porn within the cultural life of the gay male subculture, its assuaging of solitudes in asserting: 'You are not alone. Others do what you fantasize'" (Stain 168).

Stam cautions, however, that gay pornography's historical inscription cannot be viewed as fixed, but that as a circulating social discourse it must be contextualized:

"Any sexual representation gains its 'intonation,' and 'social accent,' to use Bakhtin's terminology, only within the larger dialogue with the spectator, with other texts, and with the ambient social and political context" (Stam 168).

The copious intermingling of bodies and engagement in a wide variety of sex acts

believes the way in which the body is not simply natural, but also constructed out of codes and cultural expectations, just as pornography is structured by genre conventions and dominant standards of beauty and desirability:

"If we look at commercial gay sexual representation, it appears that the antiracist movements have had little impact: the images of men and male beauty are still of white men and white male beauty" (Fung 149).

An important part of the debate initiated by people of color in the fight for visibility and equal participation in the gay movement is the understanding that the phantasmatic space of desire is also what helps give shape to the face of politics. Because pornography is also a discourse about relationships of power, Fung challenges men of color

"to examine what role the pleasure of porn plays in securing a consensus about race and desirability that ultimately works to our disadvantage" (158).

Fung implies that this disadvantage is not only political, but also psychic, for images of white men and white male beauty are

"the standards against which we compare both ourselves and often our brothers-Asian, black, native, and Latino" (149).

This consensus is politically disadvantageous, because in some way the phantasmatic space of desire and its discursive structures implicitly posit the white man as the universal subject upon which gay identity is constructed. Issues of political importance to lesbians and gays of color, such as racism and the equal access of their ethnic communities to health care and economic opportunity, become looked upon as special interests and often a hindrance to the primary "agenda" of equal rights, employment protection and visibility for gays and lesbians. As a result, lesbians and gays of color are often asked to choose between two subject positions which are often constructed as antagonistic or incompatible. [16]

This consensus which results in an often either/or identity choice for lesbians and gays of color has various psychic consequences. Prominent leaders in the hegemonic gay community often define their struggles through an analogy to the civil rights movements of the 60s led by people such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and César Chávez. The analogy does have some historical validity, but on the level of cultural practice it takes an ironic twist when re-read in the light of familiar slogans from the Black and Chicano power movements of the period. Accompanied by a politics of style as in the Afro or the cholo/a look, slogans such as "Black is beautiful" and "Brown is beautiful" were politically conscious strategies against cultural and social standards of beauty such as blondness, blue eyes, fine facial features, thin lips, among others, that created a distorted image for Afro-Americans and Chicanos of themselves as somehow unattractive and inferior. For many Afro-Americans and Chicanos, their very physical appearance hindered them from attaining access to political and economic enfranchisement, and it often still does.

Many European-American gays and lesbians do not understand the discomfort which gay and lesbian activists of color have with an oft-repeated analogy which is

not historically and politically contextualized. The civil rights movement was not just about legal empowerment but also about visibility and cultural practices. Much of the discourse in the gay movement still operates according to the principles of a liberal humanism that has appropriated the discourse of the civil rights movement, while at the same time in its hegemonic cultural practices it reinscribes the very racial and ethnic tropes which have allowed the white male to posit himself as a universal subject. Many gay and lesbian activists of color are no longer simply content to be "included" in the movement but are demanding the right both to critique and shape its discourses.

On the political front, lesbians and gays of color who make the hegemonic movement aware of contradictions such as the aforementioned one are often accused of an ethnic essentialism and a divisive separatism that weakens the goals of liberation. Although essentialism is one possible position that can be taken, countercultural practices such as the Afro or cholo/a look do not necessarily denote an essentialist and/or separatist attitude. These are strategies that attempt to break down rigid aesthetic standards and ideals — themselves based on a racist essentialism-of what is beautiful and good.

One way to counter "the essentialist rhetoric of categorical identity politics [that] threatens to erase the connectedness of our different struggles" (Mercer, *How Do I Look?* 209) would be to historicize aesthetic standards and the way they play themselves out in (popular cultural) representations such as pornography and in the process of identity formation.

It is not simply the filming of a white man and an Asian man having sex or the photographing of a black body that automatically determines an image as racist and objectifying, an argument that sometimes arises out of a certain essentialism, but rather,

"The question of enunciation — who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate? — implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference. It is enunciation that circumscribes the marginalized positions of subjects historically misrepresented or underrepresented in dominant systems of representation. To be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak, since the subject positioned in the margins is silenced and invisible" (Mercer, *How Do I look?* 181)

To be gay and to be Latino or Chicano is often to be marginalized and/or invisible, both within one's community because of sexual difference, and in the hegemonic gay community because of cultural and racial differences. The growing Hispanic communities of Los Angeles and other cities has given a new visibility to Chicano/Latino gay men within the urban milieu and at the same time has marked the segregation based on ethnicity that characterizes a city like Los Angeles. On a political level, one could make the claim for progress in the growing interaction between gays and lesbians of color and the hegemonic community and in the inclusion of race and ethnicity as part of the political discussion (although initially at this point). Still, a dominant discourse of race and ethnicity continues to mark the phantasmatic space in which representation of gay desire is constructed for the (white) gay spectator.

Watching a gay porno video with Chicanos/ Latinos in it, the Chicano/ Latino spectator could possibly find himself in a problematic relation to the image on the screen. On the one hand, the narratives often make him the subject or object of fantasy scenarios arising from a hegemonic view of Chicano/ Latino culture. On the other hand, within a society dominated by hegemonic images, he is watching at least one that contains a face similar to his own.

As contemporary film theory has demonstrated, however, an image is not transparent but composed of intertextual layers of meaning that arise out of complex ideological operations. The image of the Latino/ Chicano man in a gay pornographic film or video, then, is subject to a complex set of ideological determinations that structure and position the spectator either in opposition to or alongside hegemonic articulations of desire and racial difference. By exploring a number of dominant tropes that frame Latino and Chicano men in a growing speciality market of gay pornography, I have attempted to historicize those imaginary identifications which both structure our Eros and our politics. In so doing, I hope to begin the articulation of gay Chicano/ Latino desire from a different point of view and with an aim towards opening up our political space to the possibility of an Eros which represents the complexity of both our sexual desire and ethnic experience, an Eros of multiplicity and identities.

NOTES

1. Cherrie Moraga, "A Long Line of Vendidas," *Loving in the War Years: La que nunca pasó por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983): 90-144. See, also, Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *Third Woman: The Sexuality of Latinas* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1989); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1987); Carla Trujillo, ed., *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1991). This is only a partial listing of the writing that is available.

2. Within the past few years, there has been a growing number of Chicano and Latino gay artists who have begun to explore these issues. Groups such as the Los Angeles based ¡Viva!, a Latino gay and lesbian arts organization, have begun to provide a space in which artists can work. However, the work has not been widely disseminated and remains difficult to access. Much of the work by Chicana and Latina lesbians has been a collective effort, as can be seen by the number of anthologies collectively produced by various writers and artists. This work has received wide circulation within lesbian feminist communities. Chicano and Latino gay issues receive little attention, for instance, in the growing area of Lesbian and Gay studies. I am currently at work editing a volume which will bring together both new and published writings.

3. Although Linda Williams's *Hardcore. Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) takes as its subject heterosexual pornography, she points out that pornography can be looked at as a discourse about power and knowledge. Williams does not address the dynamics of race in terms of pornography, but I would like to conjecture that in terms of the images I analyze here sexual knowledge also becomes racial knowledge that has as

its end the denial of difference. This will be addressed further in my analysis.

4. A critique of this subject has already been initiated by black and Asian men in Canada and the United States and by European-based people of color like Kobena Mercer. Film and video makers like Marion Riggs, *TONGUES UNTIED* (1989), and *AFFIRMATIONS* (1990) have also begun to explore the issue of gay subjectivity and ethnic identity. My analysis will use some of their work in addressing the question of Chicano and Latino men in relation to pornography and is also a means of including us in the discussion. See Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis; The Eroticized Asian in Gay Porn" (145-168), and Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary" (169-222) in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

5. The title of Fung's essay comes from the stereotype of Asian men as having small penises. This stereotype becomes a way in which Asian men are viewed as having a low sex drive and as being passive and receptive in sexual acts. Fung shows the ways in which this stereotype, arising out of a historically determined Western Orientalist discourse, influences the framing of Asian men in gay pornography.

6. The increase in the number of films and videos that feature Chicano/ Latino men is based on my research and observation of the tapes available at a number of video stores that carry large selections of gay pornography in the Los Angeles area. There are no industry statistics available by genre category. Interestingly, Los Angeles is one of the largest centers in the U.S. for the production of pornography and also an area which has a large Chicano/Latino population. One could attribute this increase in production either to an increased multiculturalism on the part of the gay community or to a diversification of gay erotic (exotic?) tastes.

7. A number of white men have told me that they think Latinos are better lovers because they are "more sensual, passionate and romantic" than any other group of men.

8. For a powerful discussion of the image of black male sexuality in the history of Hollywood cinema, see Michael Rogin's "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D.W. Griffith's *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150-195. Robert Stam and Louise Spence's "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction" in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press), 632- 649; and Ella Shohat's "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 130-3): 45-84 are useful discussions of questions of race, gender and class in terms of the ways in which dominant modes of Western cinematic production have represented people of color and the Third World.

9. Richard Dyer discusses the idea of narrativity in gay pornography in very general terms in "Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms" (2729), and Tom Waugh compares the systems of representation in gay and heterosexual pornography in "Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight" (30-33). Both articles appeared in a special issue of *JUMP CUT*, no. 30 (March 1985), devoted to the question of sexual representation and gay pornography. Both Dyer and Waugh's articles are very broad in scope and position their arguments in relation to the anti-pornography debate within feminism. Although Dyer and Waugh briefly mention issues like ethnicity, class and masculinity as elements in gay male pornography, they do not directly address

these questions or their specific relation to gay politics. The section entitled "Gay Male Porn: Does Sexual Orientation Make a Difference" (190-285) in *Men Confront Pornography*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York: Crown Publishers, 1990) also has the contributors framing their arguments in terms of the anti-pornography debate. Robert Stam discusses pornography in cultural terms in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

10. Intra-cultural gender construction and dominant stereotypes meet at this point to doubly marginalize the Chicano/Latino gay man. For a discussion of the ways in which sexuality is constructed for Chicano/Latino men, see Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior," *differences* 3.2 (1991); 75-100.

11. Although presenting only two broad possible readings, I am not claiming that each individual Chicano/ Latino man would react to the text in this way. Reading against the grain of a text as a resisting reader is an activity in which the marginalized have frequently engaged. Here I am talking about the ways in which stereotypes, culturally held beliefs and other discourses work with and within visual representation to position spectators in various relations to the text and to its broader social context.

12. The work of artist Raúl Ferrets Balanquet, founder of the Latino Mid-West Video Collective, has attempted to deal with the question of queer desire in relation to a Latino cultural experience. His videos MÉRIDA PROSCRITA and WE ARE HABLANDO attempt to articulate this experience in Latino terms, critique those terms and create a possible space of desire for the spectator. Lourdes Portillo's LA OFRENDA: THE DAYS OF THE DEAD, a documentary about the Day of the Dead celebrations and rituals in Mexico and the Southwest, explores issues of gender within Chicano and Mexican cultural terms. Like Moraga and others, Portillo explores gender as a question of politics and class both as a means to celebrate and critique Chicano and Mexican culture.

13. Vladimir Correa is actually Brazilian and has performed in a wide range of mainstream gay pornographic productions. BLACK SALSA employs a cast of recognizable Chicano/Latino gay porn models: Rod Garreto and Eddie Valens. They are usually the only recognizably Chicano/ Latino models in more mainstream gay pornographic productions, but are not coded as such. There are also performers like Johnny Rahm who appears in BLACK ALLEY. In that production he was coded as Mexican, but he crosses over into mainstream productions. Mainstream productions here means those gay pornographic films and videos in which most of the performers are white and in which race and ethnicity are not coded as significant factors, usually due to the small number of men of color or because of the haters' total absence from the production. Chicano/ Latino performers like Chris Stone and Johnny Rahm, both of whom speak with heavy accents, are represented without any markers of their ethnic identity. In one Catalina production, Chris Stone is coded as an all-American football player who gets fucked by his coach. These texts do not enter the provenance of the present discussion.

14. I do not mean to indicate any specific white man or to imply that this would be all white men's fantasy of men of color, but rather I use "white man's fantasy" as a

reference to dominant discourses which construct the male of European origin as the implied universal subject of identity.

15. Chicano/ Latino men's generally low socio-economic position most likely acts as a factor which limits their access to the purchase and viewing of gay pornographic material.

16. In their article, "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988: 97-164), Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer investigate the way in which dominant gay discourses are inattentive to cultural difference. As Moraga points out in her essay, cultural discourse can also be inattentive to sexual difference. Gay Latinos become not only an Other within the white gay community, but they are also made an Other within their own communities.

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Chicano personal cinema

by Willie Varela

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"The border as metaphor has become hollow. Border aesthetics have been gentrified and border culture as a utopian mode for dialog is temporarily bankrupt." — Guillermo Gómez-Peña[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

Is the above quotation taken out of context? Of course it is. What else can one do with any type of discourse, especially cultural criticism? There is no text that is the final text. It hasn't been written. But I have to admit that Gómez-Peña's remarks have provoked within me a serious questioning of what it is that I am trying to do as a media artist living and working on the border, in my case, the El Paso-Juarez nexus. While this area is not nearly as "glamorous" or highly publicized as the San Diego-Tijuana border, which is where Gómez-Peña's initial notoriety sprang from, still this border area remains a crucial focal point for all the problems and possibilities that Gómez-Peña has outlined in his cultural commentary.

In 1971,¹ I bought my first Super 8 movie camera with money I earned as a census taker. It was a Vivitar 88P with three filming speeds, single frame advance, electronic power zoom (which went out within two months), and a pistol grip. This was to be the instrument with which I would carve a place for myself within American culture. Little did I know that I was embarked upon a long and bitter journey filled with rejection and misunderstanding. Not only would I have to work overtime to win acceptance from my white counterpart within the burgeoning avant-garde film "establishment" (a contradiction in terms, I realize, but not without foundation), but even my own people — other Chicanos — simply would not or could not understand my vision of a personal cinema, one rooted in the uniqueness of what each one of us is, i.e., an absolutely unique being in the history of the world, each with a unique set of baggage with which we negotiate existence.

To make a long story longer, I became, by default or definition, a Chicano experimental filmmaker: a living, walking anomaly, poised at the beginning of the 1970s to make films that would stand in resistance to American popular film culture. What a quaint mindset that was, but it was one that fueled my drive to make films for several years. Of course, over a period of time, living and working in El Paso, a cultural wasteland for all intents and purposes, I couldn't shake of the feeling that I was completely alone. What I didn't know was that I was completely alone. I was bereft of Chicano role models who were making personal cinema.

Now, twenty-three years down the line, I have finally come to an understanding, if not an acceptance, of why there were no others, or at least very few others, making films that were in opposition to the hegemony of Hollywood commercial cinema. There was no future in it. More important, there was no economic future in being on the margin of the margins. There were no perks to be savored, no limousines, no business lunches to be taken, no incentives for a minority media maker to turn his or her back on an industry that, if penetrated, could bring money and power to those who would bring moving images of Chicanos and Latinos to a broad U.S. audience reportedly ready to devour images of these "strangers in a strange land." Indeed, the border as a metaphor and experience had become hollow and unrewarding.

But you see, the real problem lay in the incomplete educations of Chicano media makers who were ignorant of that "other" history of film, a history that began with Georges Méliès, continued through Man Ray and Luis Buñuel, got a kick in the pants from Maya Deren, saw new life through the eyes of Stan Brakhage, become ensnared in systems logic and a certain "passion" of the mind by the Structuralists, and finally found Story again in the New Narratives of the late 70s and 80s. I was in there somewhere, making films and going on the road to plead my case. I wasn't looking for a filmic "Spanglish," but a visual language that would acknowledge the reality that a Chicano must always have one eye pointing north and the other pointing south, with the occasional luxury of both eyes actually gazing inward, to the personhood that minorities are usually denied, and that we often deny ourselves.

It was with that half-formed idea of identity that I cast my net wide in search of role models to serve as affirmation of what I wanted to do, which was to make films. I found two such examples in the figures of ex-Beatle John Lennon and "heroic" independent filmmaker Stan Brakhage. In the case of Lennon, I was more than a little familiar with the achievements and exploits of this rock star-turned-cultural hero. In the early 70s, media practitioners who toiled in the fields of popular culture were not yet granted the status of being bona fide "artists" the way many of them are now. Lennon was a maverick, a working class "hero" who wanted to be all that he could be. Subsequently, under the tutelage of Japanese conceptual artist Yoko Ono, Lennon began to branch out from his previous role as that "obscure object of desire" for millions of teenage girls to multi-media artist. His experiments ranged far and wide, into experimental music, painting, drawing, photography, performance art, and — most important for me — filmmaking. He was a man who had enough money to do anything he wanted to do in whatever medium he chose, yet he chose to make 8mm home movies while holed up in a London basement apartment. This I learned from reading Jonathan Cott's lengthy 1971 interview with the Lennons in *Rolling Stone*. His choice of such a humble moving image medium made me sit up and take notice.

The other catalyst was "visionary" filmmaker and polemicist Stan Brakhage. I learned about Brakhage from reading a biographical profile of his life and work that appeared in Sheldon Renan's book, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (1967). Once again, here was another artist who was devoting great amounts of time and creative energy to making films not only in 16mm, but also regular 8mm. Imagine! A filmmaker who didn't want to go to Hollywood, who had asserted that no less a film icon than D.W. Griffith had been responsible for

the stunting of film as an art in America, and who had made a life commitment to seeing the hitherto "unseen." Amazing. These two men, white men, got my attention. In essence they were saying DO IT! And so I did.

Did I ever wish, in my heart of hearts, that they had been Chicanos? I suppose so. But more important to me was their example. They were involved in the realization of their own individual visions, regardless of their particular stations in life. Perhaps one was rich and the other perhaps not so rich, still, each posited the urgency of personal vision above all else. This was a heady concept for a Chicano to entertain, especially since minority artists had been trained to view themselves as "representatives" of the race or ethnic group they came from. Personhood, or a strong sense of individual identity, was always secondary to racial or ethnic identity. I was certainly no different in that regard. I fought hard to be who I was, primarily because that was the only way that I could free myself to be an artist. I knew there was no "future" in the conventional sense, but that was irrelevant. What was important was to seek my identity through the lens, to live through my eyes and thereby perhaps come to see things more clearly I knew I carried around with me everything I was — a college dropout, the son of a mail carrier, a young adult looking to others for affirmation, a Chicano — but soon enough I knew I was on my own. I occupied my own "border" within the geographical border that was El Paso-Juarez. Still, identity was not to be won easily. There were places to go and people to see before I would begin to think of myself as a Chicano who happened to make films and, sometimes, as a Chicano filmmaker. Little by little, I became more aware of the nature of my ongoing project as a filmmaker: the construction of a separate framework of aesthetics that would speak to the unique experience of being situated between two cultures, caught between the past and the future. The Border was a real place to me, but like so many other places in America, it was also a state of mind.

Despite its seeming status as a zone of the mind, the border is a real place. To some, all too real. And of course one way of dealing with the realities of border life, especially for an artist, is to develop a philosophy, an aesthetics. Gómez-Peña speaks of border aesthetics, with the emphasis on "border," as having become gentrified and bankrupt as a "utopian" model. For Gómez-Peña to assert that any system of aesthetics should serve as a "utopian" model seems to me to be naive and unrealistic. Wasn't it Buñuel who said we were not living in the best of all possible worlds?

But Gómez-Peña's remarks deserve to be read closely, for what he is saying is instructive. I hear the lament of an artist over the loss of "copyright" privileges. Gómez-Peña goes on to complain in his piece that others have unfairly taken the name Border Arts Workshop and have continued to survive, and even thrive, on the triumphs of their predecessors, of which he was one, while not producing any new work of their own. Thus, Gómez-Peña posits the idea of "ownership" of what is known as The Border, and by implication, the "aesthetics" associated with it. But I say that no group or individual can "own" the border, not the Border Patrol, not Anglos, not Chicanos. The Border remains a place where ideologies are constantly being negotiated, with the deck stacked in favor of the United States, and Mexico having taken its chips and gone home. What is left is fought over by "illegal aliens," Chicanos, and busybody Anglo arts activists who see within these various internecine struggles an opportunity to make a name for themselves.

Yes, the border, or the various borders to the south of the United States are the war zones they are portrayed as, but art is always the "bonus baby" that is thrown in the pot after political and economic power have been negotiated. (Interestingly, reports are just now beginning to surface in the local El Paso newspapers about Mexico's long overdue acknowledgement that the mass illegal crossings into the United States merit some examination. Just to give you an idea of the magnitude of the problem, between 1989 and 1991, Border Patrol apprehensions of undocumented immigrants numbered in the neighborhood of 603,000. Fluid borders, indeed. And this figure is for the El Paso sector only!)

Still, since a city like El Paso is technically in the United States, this area, along with areas up and down the U.S.-Mexican border, manages to enjoy the few economic opportunities that still exist during this recessionary era. Unfortunately, the arts on the border have also suffered as the United States' fortunes continue to fall. But a certain perception as to the motivations for touting the arts on the border nonetheless continues to nag at certain segments of the Chicano arts community. That perception is that Mexican nationals are not really so interested in "crossing over" to partake of the eclectic culture which their brothers and sisters to the north have evolved, but rather to partake of the products of American consumer culture, which would include, but not to be limited to, movies, sports, magazines, clothing, appliances, audio equipment, and cars. In other words, are "they" really here to see us, or to see and enjoy the fruits of late capitalist consumer culture?

Well, what do you think? (I had to go to San Antonio in Summer 1992 as an invited guest of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center to actually meet and speak with a Mexican film programmer who was representing a group called Chicanos Noventas out of Mexico City and who was there for the expressed purpose of mending bridges between Chicano and Mexican media artists. For the first time, I actually heard a Mexican express some commonality between his people and their "representatives" to the north. Chicanos were no longer just "el malinche" but were rather a group to be taken seriously. Ironically, he was not very well received as some Chicano media makers were still nursing some resentments apparently sustained during a recent convocation in the capital city.) Chicanos, I think, recognize that Mexicans are in possession of the indigenous culture. They also recognize that Anglo-Americans are in possession of Eurocentric culture that still makes claim to being "the" world culture, however contested that claim may be. As for Chicano culture itself, I would say it is an eclectic culture. We take a little here, a little there, throw in Roman Catholicism, add a healthy dollop of Amencan-slash-Mexican-slash-Latino popular culture, bake until brown, cool, and serve. In the crevices of this cultural maelstrom is where the possibilities for Chicanos to function as personal moving image makers resides. Sooner or later, this space will open.

"An entertainer gives you those good old songs that you want to hear. An artist wants to give you what you don't know you want. Something you might know you want the next time, but never knew you wanted before." — David Cronenberg[2]

Here's a list of names: Gilbert Roland, Cesar Romero, Ricar do Montalban. Anthony Quinn. Fernando Lamas. Gonzalez Gonzalez. Rita Moreno. Jimmy Smits.

Andy Garcia. Richard "Cheech" Marin. Esai Morales. Edward James Olmos.

All of these people are, or were, in "show business," in particular, the commercial film business. They are entertainers. They help millions to "escape," to endure their struggle to survive in an increasingly polarized America. They perform a service. And I'm sure most, if not all, of them are probably decent people. But they are still giving us those same old "songs," those familiar tunes that most of us have grown tired of. You know which ones I'm referring to: the Latin Lover; the Distinguished Latino Gentleman; the Feisty Hispanic Dame; the New Age Hippie; the Mexican Court Jester; the Drug-Addled vato loco; the Barrio Boy with a Heart of Gold. These actors have all played "types" in the movies.

They have benefited from the suspension of disbelief that millions of moviegoers regularly engage in. They have shown millions of white moviegoers that Chicanos/ Latinos can speak perfectly good English, are presentable, even sexy, and that they can hold their own on the screen with white actors. But mostly, these individuals are noteworthy because they have succeeded economically. They have penetrated the Dream Machine to get their piece of the pie, which is all well and good. They have nevertheless also done their share to perpetuate stereotypes, and by working within the rigid production codes of the commercial film business, have contributed to the stranglehold that the industry has on moving image making in America and throughout the world. In other words, they have not really been agents of change. These people are admired and even revered in some quarters because they have made a lot of money, not because they have presented alternatives to many Chicanos and Latinos who aspire to work in film and television.

In the end, what is gained by criticizing a few Chicanos/ Latinos who have made it in the popular culture industry? Probably not much, but it does put into some perspective one of the main reasons why any minority media maker would even want to get into the industry. Working with the moving image has never been a cheap proposition. Even making Super 8 films has become expensive enough to raise it above mere avocation, however serious it may be. The real reason some minority moving image makers aspire to work in the commercial film industry is because of the potential for reaching a mass audience. Imagine getting your film or video seen by millions of people. This is power. And this power can lead to serious money, and this money can lead to even bigger audiences and so on, until you become like Spike Lee, who considers himself more a businessman than an artist.

And this is where the minority media makers get lost. The power that comes with economic success more often than not will obscure whatever drive toward art was present in that individual. When you eat at the same table with the Devil, you better use a very long spoon.

Here's another list: Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Diego Rivera. Frida Kahlo. Rufino Tamayo. Luis Buñuel. Tina Modotti. Raul Ruiz. Fernando Arrabal. Andres Serrano. Luis Jimenez. Lourdes Portillo.

Perhaps not a very long list, but each of these people has made a serious and personal contribution not only to the cultures of their respective countries, but to world culture as well. These contributions will endure. They will not be obscured by the changing fortunes of the marketplace nor will they have to subject themselves

to playing "types." They are unique.

Finally, a dream: Some Chicano/ Latino media activists think the only way to achieve power and visibility in Hollywood is to one day have a Chicano/ Latino studio boss. My dream would be to put Super 8 movie cameras or camcorder in the hands of hundreds, thousands of minority moving image makers. Then things would really get interesting.

NOTES

1. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art," *High Performance*, Spring 1991, p. 9.

2. "An Interview with David Cronenberg by David Breskin," *Rolling Stone*, February 6, 1992, p. 96.

Editor's note: Willie Varela's films are available from Canyon Cinema, 2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94107.

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Edin Velez interview Puerto Rican video artist

by Lillian Jiménez

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Edin Velez has been making independent videotapes for over twenty years. A prodigious maker, he has also worked as a teacher in Young Filmmakers, now known as Film/Video Arts, at the School of Visual Arts and as vice-president of production at MPCS Video Service in New York. A recipient of numerous awards and grants like the Guggenheim and U.S.-Japan Friendship Fellowships, he recently received the prestigious Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute.

Born and raised in a small mountain town in the heart of Puerto Rico, he studied fine arts at the University of Puerto Rico and the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan during the middle sixties, he traveled to New York's Global Village to study video. Unable to acclimate to New York's frigid weather and populace, he unsuccessfully attempted to convince the Puerto Rican government to subsidize community video training programs. His self-imposed exile in New York began after years of struggling to change social attitudes in Puerto Rico and spread the gospel of video as the new art form of the future,

Resettling in New York in 1969, after the introduction of the portapak, he was involved in all aspects of video production-documenting rent strikes in the Lower East Side of New York and experimenting with image processing. Originally a member of the video scene established by the Vasulkas, artists who turned their attention to video in its infancy, he experimented with finding a personal form of expression in video. Historically eschewing labels, he has created a special and unique niche within the video art world. An active member of the Latino Collaborative, a New York based support organization for Latino film and video makers, he has served on its board of directors.

His name is invoked as one of the top video artists in the country and his work has been exhibited at festivals in Italy, England, Spain, France, Brazil, Germany, Holland and Japan. Broadcast nationally and internationally, his work is part of the

permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Constantly interrogating the limits of the video frame and its ability to represent time, space, the process of cognition and cultural identity, Edin has established new levels of aesthetic creativity with his work. Beginning with TULE, a representational documentary and continuing with META MAYAN II, he has created poetic and enduring visual testaments to indigenous people. In AS IS and OBLIQUE STRATEGIST, his structural concerns and vivid imagery provide subtle insights into the dynamics of the City of New York and British composer Brian Eno. With MEANING OF THE INTERVAL and DANCE OF DARKNESS, both of which were made while he was living in Japan, he has created complex, layered and evocative work. Whether in the highlands of Guatemala, New York or Japan, Edin's work is exciting, stimulating, provocative and engaging. For years, his work has been a blend of interrogating other cultures from the perspective of the Outsider and his structural concerns. Straddling many genres and defying easy categorization, his work begins with the documentary image. Through technological manipulation of that documentary image, new levels of meaning are created. Overall, his concerns are both social and aesthetic.

While not yet finished with SIGNAL TO NOISE, a videotape investigation of Puerto Rican culture and twenty years of video practice, he is beginning a new piece on Columbus and the Quincentenary for which he received a production award from the TINS (Independent Television Service).

Two interviews were conducted with Edin, the first in December of 1989 and the second in January of 1992. Here he speaks about his involvement with video, his Muse, his role as an Outsider and reaching middle age.

What was it like growing up in Puerto Rico?

I grew up in an extremely small town where everybody knew everybody else's business and therefore, you had to behave in certain patterns and ways that couldn't be changed at all. If you didn't happen to agree with the values, it could become a difficult thing to live with. There were a lot of us who didn't agree with many of the values in Puerto Rico. The difference in large urban centers is that there are enough people who disagree with certain established values, that they can be left alone. In smaller places, it's impossible to do. Growing up in Puerto Rico, I found that walking down the street dressed differently would be enough to provoke violent attacks. On the other hand, the good side of the people was so wonderful that you always felt that you had to keep trying to change attitudes.

That was where you knew the cultural background, where you decode all the social patterns quite easily. That is where I come from; that's where I feel I'm actually home. So, for the last twenty odd years, I haven't been home. Here in the U.S. I had to relearn everything quickly cause this is still an alien culture. While I can move about in it quite well, I never kid myself into thinking that this is my culture — it never has been, it never will be. I can feel very comfortable in it but I've always had the perspective of an Outsider. I kind of like my self-imposed role as an Outsider. I enjoy the perspective it gives me.

Does that Outsider perspective find its way into your video work?

Very much so. Basically the work has in one way or another dealt with how a person who is not a part of a given society, looks at that society. Even the tapes that people have assume are Latin American — I've made tapes in Panama and in Guatemala — these are not my culture. The interesting thing is that North Americans and Europeans will say, well those are tapes that you've made in your culture! A Puerto Rican is very different from a Guatemalan just as an American is very different from an English person. So, all of my tapes have been as an Outsider looking in at another culture and it's my way of dealing with not having stayed in my own culture — working out what that means in my development as an individual. The fact is that for all my adult life, I've never been in my own culture and there have been repercussions.

Why did you choose the San Blas Islands for TULE, your first video tape?

It's funny, we make decisions that we might feel were made totally on the spur of the moment and later discover that not that many things just happen. Originally, my interest was piqued because the Kuna culture in the San Blas Islands was ostensibly considered a matriarchy, unusual for a Latin American country like Panama. They were an indigenous group that was not oppressed and thriving. I thought that was unique and worth experiencing. The video was almost secondary — the primary purpose was to experience a culture that seemed almost idyllic, a culture that did not seem to have many of the problems that we experience in our own culture. At the time, I had been living in New York for quite a while and this was a way of going back to Latin America. But I never made a conscious decision to make a Latin American tape.

Tell me about META MAYAN II because it seems a real departure from a romanticized representation of another culture.

Well, once I finished TULE, it seemed I might get support to make another tape. I had been to Guatemala to make a documentary on applied technology and had spent most of my time in the slums around Guatemala City documenting community self-help groups in the slums — open sewers, all sorts of problems. One weekend, we went to the countryside and I fell in love with the country. About a year later, I decided to go back there and make a tape. Now the reality of Guatemala was so different from the reality of the San Blas Islands because Guatemala was then and is now going through horrendous social turmoil. When I went back to Guatemala, I realized that I couldn't deal with it the same way I had dealt with the previous work.

At the time, I was also shaping a more personal vision and grappling with how to deal with social reality in a poetic manner and be true to the horrors within that situation. I attempted to make an expressionist tape — personal and poetic. Yet any person who watched it could not help but feel the tension, the problems that were endemic in the country. I think it's a more mature work than TULE and it pointed the way for new work. I decided that each tape was going to be radically different from the previous one, so I would force myself to start again stylistically.

Tell me about the aesthetic choices you made in META MAYAN II, where time and space take on an otherworldly quality, and ritual and brilliant imagery are juxtaposed.

Originally when I went there, I didn't realize that the political situation was as bad as it was. I knew there was trouble but...

I think being there and experiencing it really turned the tape around and I worked it out almost totally unconsciously as I was shooting it. There were images I recorded, that at a very instinctive level, I felt were fleeting glimpses that we seldom store or capture and are usually lost: a look over a woman's shoulder is lost in the chaos of different stimulus when you're traveling in a foreign culture. Those fleeting glimpses are usually the most telling; the ones that build up slowly over a period of time when you're in a foreign culture. So, I wanted to call attention to a kiss on the hand or a look, feet running. The cumulative effect of them is very strong and creates that feeling of mistrust and paranoia, of something about to happen.

Standing with the camera on some mountaintop, I knew that I wanted to delve into time and how we perceive it. For example, if I was traveling from one town to the next, I would actually record the entire trip as opposed to picking out parts from it. I was trying to blend a structural concern with the social and political reality of a place like Guatemala.

From the beginning of the tape, you've seen distorted slowed-down time. So, if you've watched fifteen minutes of slowed-down time imagery, the minute you see real time imagery, it seems speeded up simply because it is three or four times the speed you've grown accustomed to. In addition, there are very fast cuts which heighten that impression. So in away, I was using the time distortion with certain imagery that would call attention to the social issues.

What about the other tape that you've made, AS IS and MEANING OF THE INTERVAL?

I could tell you they are about time; they are about representation and time, but they are all really tapes about the Outsider. They are all about how it feels when you are not part of a given culture, when you are not part of a given milieu — how that affects you, how your vision is different from those that are within it — ultimately it all comes down to questions of cultural identity, through a truly round-about way. There are these sayings about artists, "the painter paints himself/ herself," I can say that I basically make the same tape over and over again. I'm asking the same questions in all of these works, they're just phrased differently, they are still the same search.

Is this the search for a home? Not a home in the sense of a place where you live and reside but a place where you feel secure?

No, I know where my home is. [laughing] First of all, I think there has to be a large healthy dose of insecurity in order to push things forward and that secure, comfortable people do not really have a need to create. I've heard many talented people say, given a choice between being secure and comfortable and neurotic and creative [laughing], I'll go for secure and comfortable. At this point in time, I'm questioning things most people take for granted because they are born and raised in a given cultural situation; they fit in. I never quite fit in my own culture in Puerto Rico because my ideas did not quite agree with the mainstream there, but on the other hand, because of my upbringing as a Puerto Rican, I never quite fit it a place

like New York. So, I've grown used to not being able to fit and I think now, that is my strongest suit.

I seem to be on the edge of some new approach to work and I'm not sure how it will happen, but it has a lot to do with not feeling the usual insecurities. [laughing] I think I'm looking for brand new insecurities.

Does SIGNAL TO NOISE, your new tape deal directly with your own culture?

This work is basically cleaning out my attic; it will deal with having worked in video for twenty years and will incorporate pieces of work that I felt could never stand on their own but will work now within the context of a larger piece. It will incorporate 20 year-old work plus brand new work that shot in Puerto Rico. I feel comfortable enough at this point that I can look at Puerto Rico in the same way that I have looked at New York, Tokyo, Guatemala and Panama. Now I feel comfortable enough with how ideal with my own culture that I can go back and look at it and not be absorbed and lost by it. So it will be interesting to see how much of that comes through. I end up distilling my videos so much that sometimes what I mean to say and what people get are separate. I'm concerned about how I will deal with a subject that is so personal that it will be difficult to distill in some sort of essence. I'm afraid of it.

I want to use the Spanish language throughout it. When I'm traveling and meet Spanish film and video makers dealing with issues out of the mainstream, and I hear Spanish spoken, it gives me a thrill because that's reiterating my roots. Serious experimental work can be done from your own cultural roots. So, it's very important that I make a work that incorporates Spanish.

I think I got nervous about talking to you about SIGNAL TO NOISE because I was feeling a certain responsibility to talk to people who float between cultures, who basically have aspects of these two cultures and can go in and out of them. You can speak fluent English, write and be taken seriously, and yet you can go and hang out *y bailar Salsa*.

But wasn't your concern that you might be saying something negative about Puerto Rico?

I don't think I can really say negative things about Puerto Rico because it's filtered through me. I'm not sure I would be saying negative things like pointing a finger because actually I don't think that's the issue. I think one of the issues, after listening to the 1989 interview, is that, I never fit in the U.S. The fact is that from the moment I was born, I never felt like I fit in over there. Even though I call Puerto Rico home. I don't remember what my definition of home was during the 1989 interview but three, almost four years later, it's still the place I can decode. So while I know exactly what's going on and that's home, in a certain sense, I don't feel that's my place.

A phrase that Coco Fusco used has been going through my mind, "I'm not going to perform an emotional strip tease." I'm more selective about who I want to speak to about how I feel. I don't know, it's still kind of shifting around, but I have this material from Federico Garcia Lorca that I want to use in SIGNAL TO NOISE which changes the whole meaning of the tape. Garcia Lorca talks about "el

duende." Lorca talks about the Muse and the Angel but,

"The duende is the inspired cry of the fires of those on the rack; it is the impatience to have done, to break free from all material beginnings which appear never to develop. It is an attempt to transcend those beginnings by abandoning everything to the moment."

In Spanish, it's even better. I'm trying to find a dual level for the art. Perhaps for being less intellectual. Now twenty years later — looking back at all my tapes which I'm very proud of — I feel that there is an intellectual shield in them. There are other levels which I've been avoiding and I want to explore those levels now — I'm not sure yet how to go about it, how to do it, and to what levels the exposure ends.

There are other film and video makers that are Puerto Rican, who may have similar cultural detachments because they were not raised in Puerto Rico. Do you feel an affinity with them, do you have the same preoccupations?

Most have different preoccupations but basically I feel an affinity. I think after living more than two decades in New York, in a way I probably have much more of an affinity with them than I do with film and video makers who have remained on the Island.

The basis of your tapes is the documentary image and its manipulation based on the circumstance, the inspiration, the concepts. How would you categorize your tapes?

When I did MEANING OF THE INTERVAL, I was telling people that this was not to be considered a documentary in any way, shape or form and that it had nothing to do with Japan. The fact that it uses Japanese imagery was just a coincidence. It really was a new way of representing thoughts and ideas on a screen and it was my thinking about the process of depicting cognition on a screen. I just happened to be living in Japan, so I used the raw material of Japan.

I was really trying to develop, and I still am working on way of representing what goes on in our mind as we walk down the street, how we filter information. Of course I'm dealing with this in a very aestheticized manner — anesthetized manner [laughter]. Because basically you're walking down the street, thinking about where you have to go and you're at a red light and you're thinking about crossing the street and you glance over to your right and there's somebody next to you asking you for money and you smell something in the air and you hear a siren and you're still waiting for the light to change. All this input is being processed and you filter out material at different levels. These were the ideas on my mind when I was in Japan so MEANING OF THE INTERVAL became a tape on the simultaneity of images. I tell people this is not a documentary, although on a superficial level, it would seem that this is basically a documentary about Japan and traditional rituals juxtaposed with contemporary imagery. I was thinking that these things happen simultaneously. For example, while a priest is blessing a waterfall in a mountain, at that same instant, there are people taking a subway train in downtown Tokyo.

I would say the only recent piece of mine that I call a documentary is DANCE OF DARKNESS because at one level I am fulfilling all the conditions of a documentary. As I was making it, the primary purpose was to convey information

about these dancers. Of course, there's a secondary level which is my usual work — exploring imagery, exploring thought processes. Yet, I see it as much more than a documentary — an exploration of a darker side of humanity — not necessarily negative when I say darker, which I saw through Japanese lens. So I find it really difficult and very restrictive to deal with labels.

But isn't it really about strategically defining a body of work in a similar way that you strategically define yourself at a given period of time and that definition is constantly changing and shifting?

I think you have a very good point. What we do is shift a label around, so when I made TULE in 1977, it was simpler for me to say, this is a documentary. But I remember, in trying to break away from labels, I started to call my work video essays to open it up. In a number of years, the term video essay became a commonplace term and a label. If I had my way, I'd take the labels away. I think as in life, the things that I prefer the most in art are indefinable. I would say each work should be looked at on its own terms. Right now I would tell you that my work is about research. It's as simple as that.

In an earlier interview, you talked about asking the same questions in the tapes, what are the questions you're asking?

I think asking questions is research. So, I've actually compressed it from two words to one word. It kind of flows from one into another. I think that any person who does anything creative repeats what they do over and over again. I'm basically trying to work out questions of identity but as I grow and mature, the questions open up further and further. I'm constantly looking at identity and reassessing it rather than figuring it out. As I said in the earlier interview, my identity is clear to me as an Outsider. So therefore. I've figured out who I am; I'm just trying to reassess what that means in relation to society. I'm dealing with the age old questions that everybody asks — I'm just repeating them, re-asking them: Who am I, what am I doing here and how can I perform more efficiently as a human being?

Your tapes are all very different one from the other yet in most of your work, you focus mostly on faces.

If I was shooting in film and it was projected on a large screen, my perception would be different as I look through the viewfinder. Knowing that my work will be seen on a 20" screen informs my work. The other reason is that the most interesting subject is a human face. It incorporates vast amounts of information and it's the ultimate interesting object. An eyebrow, a smile, a twitch can speak volumes. Dealing with television, an intimate medium, I've always been seduced by the face. Perhaps if I had been doing film, I'd be doing landscapes, although I have never found a landscape, no matter how beautiful, half as interesting as any face on the subway.

In a certain sense, it's a way of working out the fact that I'm very shy, so it's difficult for me to establish links. But when I have a camera, it becomes much easier because then I have an excuse for interaction.

In TULE and META MAYAN, both of which are about indigenous people, there is minimal sync sound which is never translated. Why wasn't the material translated?

Because in TULE which is a very direct piece of work, I really wanted to convey that there is a certain element of magic in things that you can't quite understand. As people view the grandmother with a baby on her lap swinging back and forth singing, do they need to know that she's saying, "Oh little boy, when you grow up, you'll have a canoe." I think we know much more about her by just watching her singing in her hammock than by understanding the words. What is being conveyed is her warmth, her love for that child. On the other hand, when I was there, whatever was happening was done in their language and you eventually figured it out or somebody whispered in your ear. In a way, I was putting the viewer in the same situation that I was in. I didn't understand what was going on; I had to rely on body language, on nonverbal communication. I wanted the viewer to feel that.

In the next tape, META MAYAN which is also subjective, the women and men never spoke. There is a North American commentator talking about the political situation in Guatemala.

There is very little sync sound — it's all voice-overs — and we don't understand what they're saying. Within the first minute of the tape, we hear the commentator. I felt he was necessary to establish a very strong statement — it was NBC news — obviously a white male commentator trying to be unbiased in his reporting, which meant that it was nothing. I was underlining the political instability of the region. The voice-over is a critique of the media because you are listening to this commentator trying to sound objective and balanced while he's describing a pretty horrifying situation — people being burned alive at the embassy. The people he calls leftists are basically indigenous people struggling for social equality. You see the depiction of what he's calling a peasant or a leftist when you're watching this indigenous woman who obviously is more complex and deeper than his thumbnail peasant label. I think had it been used throughout, it would have changed the work from a critique of news.

While there's no sync sound, I felt that the images would be more powerful. I tend to mistrust the spoken word. Actually for practically all of my tapes there is a minimal amount of spoken word with the exception of DANCE OF DARKNESS. I made a tape on New York City which basically has no spoken word. The only spoken words are from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.^[5] we could ask why doesn't anyone speak in AS IS?

AS IS, which is about New York, is not about indigenous people — it isn't even about people, it's a structural investigation, so that imagery has a different meaning. But I think that giving somebody a voice doesn't have to be taken literally and that to the best of my ability I gave the people a voice through the tape. I think the opening shot of META MAYAN, where the woman looks at the camera with a combination of mistrust, fear, anger — all those things are clearly seen on her face — are giving her much more of a voice than if you actually sat her down and heard her say I'm afraid for my life; I never know when I wake up if the National Guard is going to come here and kill me or not. To me seeing that face is an interview. You might not know specifics — what town she lives in or that her brother has been killed already — but you certainly have the same feeling you would get if you heard that information. My feeling was there are other documentaries being made on this subject. This is not a unique piece; I am not, as it were, the newspaper record. This piece could be poetic because there are a number of very well-made documentaries

on the situation, so I didn't feel the need to carry the entire weight of the Guatemalan situation on the shoulders of one tape.

The TULE, META MAYAN, MEANING OF THE INTERVAL and DANCE OF DARKNESS tapes, in contradistinction to OBLIQUE STRATEGIST and AS IS, are more visceral tapes. Why is that?

Yes, that's true. Making META MAYAN was an extremely painful experience psychically. It was painful to be in a place where you see obvious social injustice on such a base level and you really can't do anything about it in a direct manner. I think that's reflected in the piece — the fact that it hit me viscerally. I tried, as honestly as I could, to make a tape that reflected that.

The tapes that were made directly after that were a recoiling from it, trying to get a little bit of healing time because I really felt kind of distressed after I made META MAYAN. I remember getting an award for META MAYAN and when I got up to thank the people, the image that came into my mind is the woman who opens the tape. I thought, she might be dead now; she might have been killed a few days after this. And here I am in a country that is at least superficially much more politically stable, accepting an award, winned and dined. Meanwhile this woman has suffered and may be dead and she represents a lot of people that are going through that. It was a painful thing to feel, so after that I tried to look for subject matter that engaged me more intellectually and less emotionally.

What about MEANING OF THE INTERVAL and DANCE OF DARKNESS?

I think MEANING OF THE INTERVAL reflects a time when I was more intellectually engaged and so it's a much more intellectual tape. It doesn't hit you on a gut level because it was never meant to. DANCE OF DARKNESS does but it's diluted because of the voice-over, which was my way of explaining Butoh. The easiest thing would have been to make a tape that was a visceral attack on the viewer. I think it would have been very easy to do that in DANCE OF DARKNESS but the performers are friends of mine and I really wanted to promote them in the U.S. When it was on public television, I heard comments from people who turned it off, who wrote letters saying, how could you do this. So, I know for a fact that it affects people very emotionally. I might like to work with the Butoh performers in the future to create a piece with a similar sort of visceral approach but now it won't need to be explained or rationalized. I feel that there is no reason why something can't punch you in the stomach, and after you get over the stomach punch, your intellect kicks in. I believe that would be the best of all possible worlds.

I've heard people comment that they feel that your work is a celebration of technology because of the multi-layering, the special effects that you require. Have you heard this before?

Not a lot. I thought I'd hear that a lot more because the work is equipment intensive. While it uses a lot of technology, I've never let the tail wag the dog. Usually what has happened is that I've had concepts and not been able to execute them because the technology has not been there. I could only do multi-layering in very recent years because the technology didn't exist. Now with digital video, it will be a lot easier to do it with higher quality. So what I find myself doing is waiting for the technology to catch up with some of the concepts which are rather simple. I

don't think combining images in the way I've done is that high tech, it goes back to collage. actually thought I'd hear a lot more of those comments and I haven't because many people realize that I'm still working with content no matter how complicated it is to arrive at it.

What about the critique that the work is irrelevant for Latinos? How do you feel when people say that?

People say that about practically every person who doesn't make a social documentary and actually it's even said about people who make social documentaries [laughing]. So, you find people who make documentaries about social issues and you have people who always say that's the wrong issue or the wrong approach to the right issue, so there will always be critique. It's quite simple.

There are different levels at which one can make a statement or have an impact. I believe that being a Latino able to survive in the art world is a statement. My empowerment is saying, you are not going to tell me what I can and can not do based on where I was born and raised. To me that's the ultimate statement. Not every Latino has to make tapes on Latino issues and for somebody to tell me that, is patronizing. Nowadays, I feel much more comfortable working with Latino issues simply because I feel I've made my statement. I've proven to myself, which is who I want to prove things to. So, for somebody to come and tell me you can or cannot do this, I find irrelevant to my being.

What about being the Outsider on the margins? Your work seems to focus on marginal people, situations, performances or even a juxtaposition of mainstream versus marginal. Are you on the margins, is it an activity or a place you acknowledge, or is it coincidence?

When the term margin is used, the implication is that it is outside the areas of relevance as it were. The margin in anything is what's off, what you don't write in, but again, I feel an empathy with the Outsider. So rather than call them marginal, I would call them Outsiders with no negative connotation. I feel that is where positive things happen. The people on the outside are the people who affect changes on the inside eventually, and move the whole culture ahead to prevent it from becoming stagnant. We could say rap, hip hop — outsiders — are affecting white mainstream society to one degree or another. So, this enriches the culture. You could, in a certain sense, say indigenous people are outsiders if we assume that Western white is the inside — and they enrich the culture. I find *molas* made in Panama in upper West Side apartments and they are viewed as art. In a certain way they are expanding the culture. The center is irrelevant in my hook.

You have gotten a lot of grants, awards, accolades. You've received a Maya Deren Award (from the American Film Institute), does that mean that you are now in the center, now you are mainstream and do you fit in?

It's all a matter of perception. It's always a surprise when I go to speak some place and people have seen my tapes a number of times. This never ceases to be a surprise simply because I don't socialize, I don't go to art world events; I basically stay to myself and close friends who are not in the art world. I have no real feeling of connection to a world that would validate me in any way, shape or form. The grants and awards are a form of validation, but my day-to-day life is so distant

from all these events, that I don't see myself as successful or mainstream. So, I've never seen myself as part of anything other than the outside. I might be kidding myself but I don't feel that my work reflects a mainstream mentality. I think it reflects the mentality of someone who is outside looking in. Getting grants is not a sign of success. It's my job to make tapes — it's simple — that's my salary. I want to work on something and I get the money so that I can pay for the equipment. I don't see this as validation; I see it no different from a garage mechanic who fixes a car and gets money for it.

What advice would you have for young emerging artists, especially Latino artists?

I think that as many organizations have to close down, it would seem that the art world is not a great investment or a great career. The good thing is that art careerists will no longer be interested in it — it's no longer a good career choice to try to become an artist. Maybe now, the only people who will attempt to be artists are those who have no other choice, whether they make money or starve, they are driven to make art. So basically you have to do what you feel driven to do.

You can't think about the lack of money to edit these days. Many of us were making work when there was no funding available. We still managed to make work — it might not have been as slick and as wonderfully produced — but it was made.

Then the money arrived and we were able to do more technologically advanced work. Now money might be tight but many of us will do the work anyway and if it means it has to be less slick, that's the way it is.

I would love to see more Latinos and people of color expand, to look beyond what somebody else tells us we should be doing. I constantly bemoan the lack of experimental work by artists of color in video. There's no reason why the work can't be socially aware and experimental.

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The numbers game

by Chon A. Noriega

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From June 15 to 17, 1993, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held meetings in Los Angeles as part of a three to five year study on the rise in ethnic and racial tension in the United States. The Commission had already held hearings in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, with projected sites in New York City and Miami. It planned to include additional research and reports from the commission's fifty-one state advisory committees. On the surface, these meetings responded to the resurgence of ethnic and racial violence in major urban centers, addressing police-community relations, equal employment opportunity, economic development, and access to social services. But, upon closer examination, the investigation reveals a significant, though uncertain reorientation of the racial paradigm, insofar as the hearings followed upon "riots" or "civil disturbances" in predominantly Latino-populated communities, from Mount Pleasant to South Central. This is something the commission's first report — on the civil rights concerns of Latinos in the District of Columbia — made explicit as it drew parallels with the national Latino population, which increased 53% during the 1980s, and now accounted for large portions of the cities under investigation: from 12% in Washington, D.C., to 40% in Los Angeles, to 62% in Miami.[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#)

The hearings in Los Angeles had been planned before the riots. In fact, Chairperson Arthur Fletcher acknowledged that separate hearings were to have been held on Latinos in the media, since Latinos are much more underrepresented than other minority groups relative to their population. But, as Fletcher further acknowledged, the media hearings had been stopped on account of "powerful people on both sides of the aisle in Congress" who represented the interests of the news media and entertainment industry.[2] As a consequence, a daylong series of panels on the news media and entertainment television were incorporated into the ongoing investigation on racial and ethnic tensions when the commission met in Los Angeles. Below is an account (part summary, part hindsight) of my own testimony before the commission. More than anything else, it highlights the "numbers game" that is assumed to be the prerequisite for social change in a democratic, free market society.

TESTIMONY

Since the commission's last report on minorities in television, *Window Dressing on the Set: An Update*, released in January 1979, there have been three significant

developments that need to be considered for their impact upon minorities:

1. Since the report, networks have had to compete with cable systems, pay TV and home video — within a shrinking national economy. Conventional wisdom within the industry holds that these economic factors are responsible for the subsequent failure to diversify primetime content and formats. I will show that this is a misleading rationale.

2. Since the report, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has supported deregulation of the television industry, with the result that seldom, if ever has a station lost its license on the basis of equal employment opportunity violations. Given these two factors, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights findings and recommendations for 1979 still apply today. Three conclusions from that report bear reprinting here:

- "The FCC should conduct an inquiry and proposed rulemaking in which it would investigate the relationship between the network programming decision-making process, the resulting portrayal of minorities and women, and the impact of these portrayals on viewers."

The commission argued that such a step on the part of the FCC would not violate the First Amendment, whereas the courts had found that earlier efforts had done so (for example, the creation of family viewing hour) or, conversely, had violated the Administrative Procedures Act in an attempt not to infringe on the First Amendment.

- "The FCC should seek authorization from Congress to regulate equal employment opportunity at the networks and among all owners of more than one broadcast facility." The FCC regulates equal employment opportunity at broadcast stations, but is not empowered to regulate the networks and broadcast group owners."
- "The FCC should revise Form 395 to facilitate a thorough utilization analysis."

Form 395 collects data on station employment, and is used to assess compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity Rule upon a station's license renewal. The form's nine job categories, however, do not provide sufficient detail, especially for decision-making and programming positions. Without these revisions, challenging groups are in a Catch-22, since "discovery" (or, the collection of additional data) is allowed only when the FCC accepts a Petition to Deny. And the FCC rarely, if ever, accepts a petition that alleges employment discrimination on the basis of statistical under-representation alone (that is, on the data available from Form 395).[3]

3. We are currently at the onset of the next structural change in the television industry, with new communications technologies such as fiber optics predicted to supplant both cable and over-the-air broadcast. These changes raise fundamental issues about public, educational and governmental access. In a report published November 1992 by National Video Resources, researchers concluded that a brief "window of necessity" of no more than four years exists in order

"to assert the public interest, reframe the debate in terms of democratic and social consequences, and involve legislators and the public in deciding the key questions of public policy."[4]

These vast and uncertain changes suggest the need for a major investigation of the media in order to ensure that civil rights and equal employment opportunity are part of the communications "superhighway" of the 21st century. Notice that no one is calling this new entity a "freeway" — it is a commercial venture — even though its infrastructure will no doubt be financed by the federal government, and its revenue will derive in some measure from already-diminished education and library budgets. There exists a similar need to examine the Latino population, which will become the largest minority group in the same time period. For the issue at hand, however, the problem can be broken down into three major areas: audiences, portrayals, and employment.

1. Audiences

With respect to audiences, there are two issues: consumption (ratings) and impact. In a Nielsen study commissioned by Spanish-language networks Univision and Telemundo, researchers discovered weekly primetime HUT (homes using television) levels of 61% for Hispanic families, compared with a 54% average for the entire market.[5] Hispanics watched an average of 57 hours, 58 minutes of television a week, compared to 47 hours a week watched by viewers overall. Blacks watched an average of 69 hours a week.[6]

The fact of a strong minority audience base[7] often leads community and media activists to expect or demand the television industry to exhibit some level of responsibility for this market. The change that has occurred, however, comes not from producers and broadcasters, but from advertisers, whose expenditures directed at Hispanic consumers have grown 20% in recent years. After all, Hispanics spend nearly \$200 billion on consumer goods each year.[8] In one sense, these figures almost argue against changes in minority portrayal and employment, since the Hispanic population is presented as a pre-existing market that already displays the requisite or desired characteristics for profit: it is large, centralized, with strong product loyalty, and watches a lot of television. In other words, these figures help networks sell commercial time, and create an impetus for both minority-specific and integrated commercials,[9] but in and of themselves do little to facilitate other changes.

The recent Senate hearings on television violence point to another way in which audiences have become the fulcrum for regulation of the industry. In an oft-cited report, the American Psychological Association (APA) calculated that the average U.S. child, by the seventh grade, has watched 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television:

"Accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior...Children and adults who watch a large number of aggressive program: also tend to hold attitudes and values that favor the use of aggression to solve conflicts."[10]

What is interesting in these recent studies and Senate hearings is that for the most part attention has been placed on the abstract viewer of violence, usually a child,

and not on the nature of the violence depicted: Who hits whom. In fact, I have found just one mention in the popular press of such a study, again by the APA, which concluded that women, elderly individuals and minorities are disproportionately cast as victims of television violence.[11] In other words, if there is indeed a *causal* correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior, it is not a universal one, but rather one targeted at specific groups. Could it be that television violence reinforces "attitudes and values" in which aggression is an acceptable tool in "resolving" perceived conflicts with women and minorities? Admittedly, such questions are not popular outside of the social sciences. In the Senate, it is a matter of coalition politics between liberal and conservative forces, while in the humanities, it is a problem of or with empiricism.

Nonetheless, there remains an unanswered question about how to approach the issue from a social or communitarian perspective within an arena dominated by the economic and the political. In the end, empirical studies were never ends in themselves, but rather the basis for an appeal for adherence to an established moral, economic, or legal framework. For the APA, the empirical studies resulted in little more than a call for the FCC to return to the underlying principle of the Communication Act of 1934: namely, that broadcasters must serve the public interest, convenience and necessity to retain their licenses. No one noted the irony that such an appeal was needed in order for the government to enforce the law, an observation that might have revealed the class and racial bias inherent in the concurrent "tough on crime" rhetoric of politicians.

2. Minority portrayals

Hispanics comprise about 10% of the U.S. population, but are featured in only 1% of the roles of primetime television series, and even less in major films.[12] In an extrapolation of data in *Window Dressing on the Set*, I have calculated that Hispanic characters accounted for just 0.7% of continuing roles on primetime from 1969 to 1977. The figure for 1992 is 0.8%, or five continuing Latino roles. In addition to overall representation, there is the issue of the lack of format diversity for minority characters, which tend to appear in situation comedies. Minority characters also are more likely to have lower-status occupations. From 1957 to 1987, whites played 94% of television's educated professionals and business executives, while Blacks played 5% and Hispanics only 1%.[13]

3. Minority employment

ACTORS: A recent report by the Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists noted that women, minorities, older people, and the disabled are vastly underrepresented on screen in comparison to their actual numbers in society. Minorities are even less represented during daytime television programming. Minority membership in the guild has averaged about 15% over the past decade, with roughly the same percentage of days worked: Blacks (9%), Hispanics (3.5%), Asian American (2%), and Native American (0.5%). According to Professor George Gerbner, the study's director,

"in an inescapable way, this has to be seen as an indictment of civil rights, especially in a medium that is licensed not just as a business but as a public trustee." [14]

DIRECTORS: According to a Directors Guild of America (DGA) report released April 20, 1992, the number of days worked by Hispanic directors increased from 1.0% of all television and film work done in 1983 to 1.3% in 1991 — an increase of one-third of one percent in almost a decade. As Director Jesús Salgado Treviño points out, at this rate, it will take 300 years for Latinos to reach parity with *current* national demographics.[15] The total days worked per year for all directors rose from 28,000 in 1983 to 50,000 in 1991. In that time, female Hispanic directors worked a total of 27 days (roughly, one-ten thousandth of a percent). Blacks accounted for 2% of directors and 1.7% of days worked in the DGA in 1991. Overall, the employment of minority directors decreased from 5% in 1983 to 3% in 1991. In 1988, no minority directors were hired by the studios and networks.[16]

WRITERS: In a recent report, the Writers Guild of American, West, noted that between 1987 to 1991 the pay gap for racial minorities narrowed from 54¢ for every dollar earned by whites to 79¢. This figure applies to television only, since too few minority writers work on movies in order to establish a clear pattern. Minority screen and television writers account for 4% of the guild's membership, with Latinos accounting for 0.7%. For all minorities, employment increased by no more than 1%: In television, from 2.9% (1987) to 3.9% (1991); and in film, from 2.0% (1987) to 2.6% (1991).[17] Again, at these rates, it will take over 100 years for minorities to reach parity with current national demographics. These opportunities are further limited to situation comedies, without significant role in decision-making. In the usual scenario, minority writers are often hired to check for correct slang.[18] The few Hispanic-themed shows have never had a Hispanic writing team, let alone writer in a key role.

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES: Little has changed since the Kerner Commission in 1968 first drew attention to the need to diversify the management level of the mass media. On 1989 spring season prime time programs, only 7% of producers were racial minorities (12 of 169).[19] And, according to the NAACP, only 2.5% of production executives at major Hollywood companies are racial minorities (5 out of 200).[20] The 1989 Hollywood Writers' Report offers more comprehensive figures: 1.3% of all primetime executive producers and co-executive producers, and 1.6% of all producers and co-producers were minorities.[21] The number of minorities in hyphenate positions (writer-producer) has remained constant at about 5% over the past decade.[22] In the commission's own briefing paper, "Minorities in the Entertainment Television Industry," decision-making positions are identified as the crux for significant change in the industry.

THE NUMBERS GAME

While the figures for portrayal and employment have stayed the same (in 1983 in JUMP CUT 28, Jesús Treviño called it the "2% factor"), the percentage of racial minorities continues to increase relative to the total U.S. population. The Latino population in particular has nearly doubled in the past two decades, from 4.5% in 1970 to 8.2% in 1990.[23] (These figures are from the U.S. census and are considered inaccurate, with the actual current percentage usually put at between 9% and 10%.) Neither the industry nor media advocates have revealed how the exponential increase in the Latino population changes the significance of the near-constant industry figures. This change occurs because the Latino population doubles both in real numbers — from 9.1 million (1970) to 20.1 million (1990) —

and as a percentage within the total U.S. population. Thus, beneath the apparent statistical stasis within the industry lurks a situation in which actual employment opportunity and equitable representation have decreased by about 50% for the Latino population.

From a market-based perspective, minority under-representation is explained as a result of the need for a "universal appeal" that will satisfy the perceived taste and expectations of the prime time audience.[24] Minority themes and characters represent too much of a risk factor. But between 70 and 75% of new television series are cancelled in their first year.[25] Of the 34 television series that premiered in 1992, only 8 continued to 1993, a success rate of 23.5%. In other words, following formats and actors with proven "track records" fails to achieve a "universal appeal" three out of four times. By its very nature, prime time television is a high-risk enterprise; so it is not a question of *whether* the industry takes risks, but of *whom* it lets do so.

These contradictions reveal an unspoken problem with the numbers game: Those who opt to play must assume/ attribute some notion of merit, rationality, and authority on the part of the system or institution whose rules define the game. But the game often becomes an end in itself, the impossible first step toward (1) obtaining the rights and protections already written into the law, and (2) the supposed opportunities or level playing field" of the free market system.

As I prepared for the hearings, I spoke with a number of Chicano producers and media professionals, who reminded me that Latinos have been "playing the numbers game" for over two decades without success. The industry was too powerful and unaccountable. By the end of my panel I had come to understand their position all too well as commissioners' questions focused on the viewer — white and minority — and not the institution.

The hearings were presented to the press as a series of panels that would deal with

"the effect of news media and television entertainment programming on America's perception of race and ethnicity." [26]

But while the commission's news release emphasized issues of "portrayal" and "perception," the actual testimonies often attempted to redirect the commissioners' attention to their actual bailiwick: equal employment opportunity. For over a decade, attention to issues of content and impact had operated within an ideology of the individual. If television had an impact on individual viewers, then it was up to those viewers to realize that "the power to reform television is in your hand" and change channels.

In the meantime, entertainment television operated as a business that also had civil rights, in particular, freedom of speech. This strategic anthropomorphism undercut the legal framework that established communitarian concerns — or, the "public interest" — as a third point between free market and free speech. As a consequence, television acquired (and conflated) both freedoms, playing one off against the other in order to evade the demands of minority or community groups for access, employment, and more equitable representation. Demands for employment violated producers' artistic expression; while demands for "positive images" impeded the industry's profit motive. Or so the argument went.

Thus, despite the Communication Act of 1934, television operated in pretty much the same way as did Hollywood studios when it came to issues of equal employment opportunity and equitable representation. This is a point made clear in the recent reports by the guilds, which deal with both networks and studios.

The hearings came at a time of transition within the commission, as its conservative hegemony was about to come to an end. In addition, various sectors of the government had turned to the media as a "new" public policy issue, from the "information superhighway" to the impact of violence. Finally, the guilds released major reports in the period just before the hearings. In testimony before the commission, advocates and experts offered "access" as a solution to content and impact issues. In this view, minority employment within all levels of the industry — or, in sociological terms, structural assimilation — would lead to the desired changes in the types of series produced without a violation of the First Amendment.

To this suggestion, I added that no trainee programs be involved in the process, since these have not lead to increased employment, but rather perpetuate pay disparities, undermine the guilds, and give studios falsely inflated minority employment numbers, publicity, and tax benefits.

In response to the commissioners' line of questioning — which worked backwards from establishing a problem to fleshing out its emotional and social impact on individuals — I found myself questioning the commissioners themselves, asking if we really needed to prove that media had an impact on viewers, that minorities were underemployed in the industry, and that minorities were underrepresented in movies and entertainment television. In other words, did we really have to continue playing the numbers game, or could we move on to the practical steps that would solve these problems? Coming at the end of the panel, my questions were ones that the report will have to answer.

Looking back at the past twenty years, however, progress has been the product of protests, boycotts, and takeovers more often than government regulation and adjudication. As a consequence, progress has also been sporadic and piecemeal. Undoubtedly, this will not be the answer given by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in its report. More likely, the commission will identify many of the same problems that it did in 1979, and, as it did then, will call for additional, more accurate data with which to bolster its critique of the FCC and the regulatory process. It is difficult not to become cynical about the hearings and the eventual report, however noble the intentions of the commission. There is, after all, a problematic assumption behind the numbers game: namely, that the statistical substantiation of discrimination will reform the film and television industries once that information is brought to light.

In another context, Henri Lefebvre refers to this assumption as the "illusion of transparency" in which communication (of information, knowledge) alone acts to transform social space. The result is a belief in "freedom of expression" that pays no attention to the physical and institutional structures that limit access to social space.[27] What Lefebvre suggests, then, is that the numbers game is more a strategy of power than a search for knowledge. What these numbers ultimately "mean" will depend on the power relations within which they are asserted.

NOTES

1. These local concerns in Washington, D.C. — and the need for an investigation — were brought to national attention following civil disturbances in May 1991 that erupted after a rookie police officer shot a Salvadoran man during an arrest for public drinking. See U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racial and Ethnic Tensions in American Communities: Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination. Volume I: The Mount Pleasant Report*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1993).
2. I am paraphrasing Fletcher's rather frank comments during the hearings after I asked him to clarify the commission's own motivations and intentions for the hearings.
3. Despite pressure in the 1970s from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the courts, the FCC continued to deny hearings filed on behalf of women and racial minorities. For an overview, see U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1977), chapter 7. The three recommendations are taken from U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set. An Update*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1979), pp. 62-64.
4. Jeffrey Chester and Kathryn Montgomery, Ph.D., "Media in Transition: Independents & the Future of Television," *National Video Resources Reports* no. 10 (November 1992).
5. *Variety*, December 10, 1990, p. 31
6. *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1992, p. F3.
7. According to the NAACP, racial minorities account for 35% of the movie going audience. *Variety*, September 10, 1990, p.5.
8. *Variety*, December 10, 1990, p. 31.
9. This appears to be confirmed by a recent report by the Screen Actors Guild, which found the rate of employment for Hispanics in television commercials (combined on- and off-air principals) to be about twice that of theatrical films (4%) and television (3%). Screen Actors Guild, "Employment in Entertainment: The Search For Diversity: A SAG Statistical Survey of Ethnicity, Age, and Gender in Film, Television, and Commercials," June 15, 1993,
10. *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1993. M4.
11. *Albuquerque Journal*, February 26, 1992, p. A3.
12. Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller, "Hispanic Americans," *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television: Historical Essays and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), pp. 243-259.
13. David Atkin. "An Analysis of Television Series with Minority Lead Characters,"

Critical Studies in Mass Communication 9 (1992): 337-349.

14. *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1993, p. P9; and Screen Actors Guild, "Employment in Entertainment," June 15, 1993.
15. Jesús Salvador Treviño, *Hispanic* (August 1992): 76.
16. "DGA Figures on Days Worked by Women and Minorities," News release, April 20, 1992, Directors Guild of America; *Variety*, April 21, 1992, pp. 1, 18; Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Looking Beyond the Statistics," *DGA News* (June-July 1992), pp. 13-14.
17. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1993 Hollywood Writers Report: A Survey of the Employment of Writers in the Film, Broadcast, and Cable Industries for the Period 1987-1991* (June 1993).
18. *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1993, p. F2.
19. Sally Steenland, *Unequal Picture: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American Characters on Television* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women, August 1989), p. 37.
20. *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1992, p. P2.
21. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1989 Hollywood Writers' Report: Unequal Access, Unequal Pay* (April 1989), p. 19
22. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1993 Hollywood Writers Report* (June 1993), p.32.
23. Frank L. and Renee Schick, eds. *Statistical Handbook on U.S. Hispanics* (Phoenix: Onyx Press, 1991).
24. As the Commission noted in its 1977 Findings, "The presentation of minorities and women in a representative and realistic manner has been impeded by an assumption that do to so would diminish televisions use as a medium whose programming is designed primarily to attract the largest possible audience." There is no response or refutation of this assumption in the findings. *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1977), p. 148.
25. *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1992, p. F1; and *Broadcasting*, March 9, 1992, p. 21.
26. "Rights Commission Sets Los Angeles Hearings," News release, May 26, 1993, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.
27. Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), pp. 27-29.

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From June 15 to 17, 1993, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held meetings in Los Angeles as part of a three to five year study on the rise in ethnic and racial tension in the United States. The Commission had already held hearings in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, with projected sites in New York City and Miami. It planned to include additional research and reports from the commission's fifty-one state advisory committees. On the surface, these meetings responded to the resurgence of ethnic and racial violence in major urban centers, addressing police-community relations, equal employment opportunity, economic development, and access to social services. But, upon closer examination, the investigation reveals a significant, though uncertain reorientation of the racial paradigm, insofar as the hearings followed upon "riots" or "civil disturbances" in predominantly Latino-populated communities, from Mount Pleasant to South Central. This is something the commission's first report — on the civil rights concerns of Latinos in the District of Columbia — made explicit as it drew parallels with the national Latino population, which increased 53% during the 1980s, and now accounted for large portions of the cities under investigation: from 12% in Washington, D.C., to 40% in Los Angeles, to 62% in Miami.[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#)

The hearings in Los Angeles had been planned before the riots. In fact, Chairperson Arthur Fletcher acknowledged that separate hearings were to have been held on Latinos in the media, since Latinos are much more underrepresented than other minority groups relative to their population. But, as Fletcher further acknowledged, the media hearings had been stopped on account of "powerful people on both sides of the aisle in Congress" who represented the interests of the news media and entertainment industry.[2] As a consequence, a daylong series of panels on the news media and entertainment television were incorporated into the ongoing investigation on racial and ethnic tensions when the commission met in Los Angeles. Below is an account (part summary, part hindsight) of my own testimony before the commission. More than anything else, it highlights the "numbers game" that is assumed to be the prerequisite for social change in a democratic, free market society.

TESTIMONY

Since the commission's last report on minorities in television, *Window Dressing on the Set: An Update*, released in January 1979, there have been three significant

developments that need to be considered for their impact upon minorities:

1. Since the report, networks have had to compete with cable systems, pay TV and home video — within a shrinking national economy. Conventional wisdom within the industry holds that these economic factors are responsible for the subsequent failure to diversify primetime content and formats. I will show that this is a misleading rationale.

2. Since the report, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has supported deregulation of the television industry, with the result that seldom, if ever has a station lost its license on the basis of equal employment opportunity violations. Given these two factors, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights findings and recommendations for 1979 still apply today. Three conclusions from that report bear reprinting here:

- "The FCC should conduct an inquiry and proposed rulemaking in which it would investigate the relationship between the network programming decision-making process, the resulting portrayal of minorities and women, and the impact of these portrayals on viewers."

The commission argued that such a step on the part of the FCC would not violate the First Amendment, whereas the courts had found that earlier efforts had done so (for example, the creation of family viewing hour) or, conversely, had violated the Administrative Procedures Act in an attempt not to infringe on the First Amendment.

- "The FCC should seek authorization from Congress to regulate equal employment opportunity at the networks and among all owners of more than one broadcast facility." The FCC regulates equal employment opportunity at broadcast stations, but is not empowered to regulate the networks and broadcast group owners."
- "The FCC should revise Form 395 to facilitate a thorough utilization analysis."

Form 395 collects data on station employment, and is used to assess compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity Rule upon a station's license renewal. The form's nine job categories, however, do not provide sufficient detail, especially for decision-making and programming positions. Without these revisions, challenging groups are in a Catch-22, since "discovery" (or, the collection of additional data) is allowed only when the FCC accepts a Petition to Deny. And the FCC rarely, if ever, accepts a petition that alleges employment discrimination on the basis of statistical under-representation alone (that is, on the data available from Form 395).[3]

3. We are currently at the onset of the next structural change in the television industry, with new communications technologies such as fiber optics predicted to supplant both cable and over-the-air broadcast. These changes raise fundamental issues about public, educational and governmental access. In a report published November 1992 by National Video Resources, researchers concluded that a brief "window of necessity" of no more than four years exists in order

"to assert the public interest, reframe the debate in terms of democratic and social consequences, and involve legislators and the public in deciding the key questions of public policy."[4]

These vast and uncertain changes suggest the need for a major investigation of the media in order to ensure that civil rights and equal employment opportunity are part of the communications "superhighway" of the 21st century. Notice that no one is calling this new entity a "freeway" — it is a commercial venture — even though its infrastructure will no doubt be financed by the federal government, and its revenue will derive in some measure from already-diminished education and library budgets. There exists a similar need to examine the Latino population, which will become the largest minority group in the same time period. For the issue at hand, however, the problem can be broken down into three major areas: audiences, portrayals, and employment.

1. Audiences

With respect to audiences, there are two issues: consumption (ratings) and impact. In a Nielsen study commissioned by Spanish-language networks Univision and Telemundo, researchers discovered weekly primetime HUT (homes using television) levels of 61% for Hispanic families, compared with a 54% average for the entire market.[5] Hispanics watched an average of 57 hours, 58 minutes of television a week, compared to 47 hours a week watched by viewers overall. Blacks watched an average of 69 hours a week.[6]

The fact of a strong minority audience base[7] often leads community and media activists to expect or demand the television industry to exhibit some level of responsibility for this market. The change that has occurred, however, comes not from producers and broadcasters, but from advertisers, whose expenditures directed at Hispanic consumers have grown 20% in recent years. After all, Hispanics spend nearly \$200 billion on consumer goods each year.[8] In one sense, these figures almost argue against changes in minority portrayal and employment, since the Hispanic population is presented as a pre-existing market that already displays the requisite or desired characteristics for profit: it is large, centralized, with strong product loyalty, and watches a lot of television. In other words, these figures help networks sell commercial time, and create an impetus for both minority-specific and integrated commercials,[9] but in and of themselves do little to facilitate other changes.

The recent Senate hearings on television violence point to another way in which audiences have become the fulcrum for regulation of the industry. In an oft-cited report, the American Psychological Association (APA) calculated that the average U.S. child, by the seventh grade, has watched 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television:

"Accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior...Children and adults who watch a large number of aggressive program: also tend to hold attitudes and values that favor the use of aggression to solve conflicts."[10]

What is interesting in these recent studies and Senate hearings is that for the most part attention has been placed on the abstract viewer of violence, usually a child,

and not on the nature of the violence depicted: Who hits whom. In fact, I have found just one mention in the popular press of such a study, again by the APA, which concluded that women, elderly individuals and minorities are disproportionately cast as victims of television violence.[11] In other words, if there is indeed a *causal* correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior, it is not a universal one, but rather one targeted at specific groups. Could it be that television violence reinforces "attitudes and values" in which aggression is an acceptable tool in "resolving" perceived conflicts with women and minorities? Admittedly, such questions are not popular outside of the social sciences. In the Senate, it is a matter of coalition politics between liberal and conservative forces, while in the humanities, it is a problem of or with empiricism.

Nonetheless, there remains an unanswered question about how to approach the issue from a social or communitarian perspective within an arena dominated by the economic and the political. In the end, empirical studies never end in themselves, but rather the basis for an appeal for adherence to an established moral, economic, or legal framework. For the APA, the empirical studies resulted in little more than a call for the FCC to return to the underlying principle of the Communication Act of 1934: namely, that broadcasters must serve the public interest, convenience and necessity to retain their licenses. No one noted the irony that such an appeal was needed in order for the government to enforce the law, an observation that might have revealed the class and racial bias inherent in the concurrent "tough on crime" rhetoric of politicians.

2. Minority portrayals

Hispanics comprise about 10% of the U.S. population, but are featured in only 1% of the roles of primetime television series, and even less in major films.[12] In an extrapolation of data in *Window Dressing on the Set*, I have calculated that Hispanic characters accounted for just 0.7% of continuing roles on primetime from 1969 to 1977. The figure for 1992 is 0.8%, or five continuing Latino roles. In addition to overall representation, there is the issue of the lack of format diversity for minority characters, which tend to appear in situation comedies. Minority characters also are more likely to have lower-status occupations. From 1957 to 1987, whites played 94% of television's educated professionals and business executives, while Blacks played 5% and Hispanics only 1%.[13]

3. Minority employment

ACTORS: A recent report by the Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists noted that women, minorities, older people, and the disabled are vastly underrepresented on screen in comparison to their actual numbers in society. Minorities are even less represented during daytime television programming. Minority membership in the guild has averaged about 15% over the past decade, with roughly the same percentage of days worked: Blacks (9%), Hispanics (3.5%), Asian American (2%), and Native American (0.5%). According to Professor George Gerbner, the study's director,

"in an inescapable way, this has to be seen as an indictment of civil rights, especially in a medium that is licensed not just as a business but as a public trustee." [14]

DIRECTORS: According to a Directors Guild of America (DGA) report released April 20, 1992, the number of days worked by Hispanic directors increased from 1.0% of all television and film work done in 1983 to 1.3% in 1991 — an increase of one-third of one percent in almost a decade. As Director Jesús Salgado Treviño points out, at this rate, it will take 300 years for Latinos to reach parity with *current* national demographics.[15] The total days worked per year for all directors rose from 28,000 in 1983 to 50,000 in 1991. In that time, female Hispanic directors worked a total of 27 days (roughly, one-ten thousandth of a percent). Blacks accounted for 2% of directors and 1.7% of days worked in the DGA in 1991. Overall, the employment of minority directors decreased from 5% in 1983 to 3% in 1991. In 1988, no minority directors were hired by the studios and networks.[16]

WRITERS: In a recent report, the Writers Guild of American, West, noted that between 1987 to 1991 the pay gap for racial minorities narrowed from 54¢ for every dollar earned by whites to 79¢. This figure applies to television only, since too few minority writers work on movies in order to establish a clear pattern. Minority screen and television writers account for 4% of the guild's membership, with Latinos accounting for 0.7%. For all minorities, employment increased by no more than 1%: In television, from 2.9% (1987) to 3.9% (1991); and in film, from 2.0% (1987) to 2.6% (1991).[17] Again, at these rates, it will take over 100 years for minorities to reach parity with current national demographics. These opportunities are further limited to situation comedies, without significant role in decision-making. In the usual scenario, minority writers are often hired to check for correct slang.[18] The few Hispanic-themed shows have never had a Hispanic writing team, let alone writer in a key role.

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES: Little has changed since the Kerner Commission in 1968 first drew attention to the need to diversify the management level of the mass media. On 1989 spring season prime time programs, only 7% of producers were racial minorities (12 of 169).[19] And, according to the NAACP, only 2.5% of production executives at major Hollywood companies are racial minorities (5 out of 200).[20] The 1989 Hollywood Writers' Report offers more comprehensive figures: 1.3% of all primetime executive producers and co-executive producers, and 1.6% of all producers and co-producers were minorities.[21] The number of minorities in hyphenate positions (writer-producer) has remained constant at about 5% over the past decade.[22] In the commission's own briefing paper, "Minorities in the Entertainment Television Industry," decision-making positions are identified as the crux for significant change in the industry.

THE NUMBERS GAME

While the figures for portrayal and employment have stayed the same (in 1983 in JUMP CUT 28, Jesús Treviño called it the "2% factor"), the percentage of racial minorities continues to increase relative to the total U.S. population. The Latino population in particular has nearly doubled in the past two decades, from 4.5% in 1970 to 8.2% in 1990.[23] (These figures are from the U.S. census and are considered inaccurate, with the actual current percentage usually put at between 9% and 10%.) Neither the industry nor media advocates have revealed how the exponential increase in the Latino population changes the significance of the near-constant industry figures. This change occurs because the Latino population doubles both in real numbers — from 9.1 million (1970) to 20.1 million (1990) —

and as a percentage within the total U.S. population. Thus, beneath the apparent statistical stasis within the industry lurks a situation in which actual employment opportunity and equitable representation have decreased by about 50% for the Latino population.

From a market-based perspective, minority under-representation is explained as a result of the need for a "universal appeal" that will satisfy the perceived taste and expectations of the prime time audience.[24] Minority themes and characters represent too much of a risk factor. But between 70 and 75% of new television series are cancelled in their first year.[25] Of the 34 television series that premiered in 1992, only 8 continued to 1993, a success rate of 23.5%. In other words, following formats and actors with proven "track records" fails to achieve a "universal appeal" three out of four times. By its very nature, prime time television is a high-risk enterprise; so it is not a question of *whether* the industry takes risks, but of *whom* it lets do so.

These contradictions reveal an unspoken problem with the numbers game: Those who opt to play must assume/ attribute some notion of merit, rationality, and authority on the part of the system or institution whose rules define the game. But the game often becomes an end in itself, the impossible first step toward (1) obtaining the rights and protections already written into the law, and (2) the supposed opportunities or level playing field" of the free market system.

As I prepared for the hearings, I spoke with a number of Chicano producers and media professionals, who reminded me that Latinos have been "playing the numbers game" for over two decades without success. The industry was too powerful and unaccountable. By the end of my panel I had come to understand their position all too well as commissioners' questions focused on the viewer — white and minority — and not the institution.

The hearings were presented to the press as a series of panels that would deal with

"the effect of news media and television entertainment programming on America's perception of race and ethnicity." [26]

But while the commission's news release emphasized issues of "portrayal" and "perception," the actual testimonies often attempted to redirect the commissioners' attention to their actual bailiwick: equal employment opportunity. For over a decade, attention to issues of content and impact had operated within an ideology of the individual. If television had an impact on individual viewers, then it was up to those viewers to realize that "the power to reform television is in your hand" and change channels.

In the meantime, entertainment television operated as a business that also had civil rights, in particular, freedom of speech. This strategic anthropomorphism undercut the legal framework that established communitarian concerns — or, the "public interest" — as a third point between free market and free speech. As a consequence, television acquired (and conflated) both freedoms, playing one off against the other in order to evade the demands of minority or community groups for access, employment, and more equitable representation. Demands for employment violated producers' artistic expression; while demands for "positive images" impeded the industry's profit motive. Or so the argument went.

Thus, despite the Communication Act of 1934, television operated in pretty much the same way as did Hollywood studios when it came to issues of equal employment opportunity and equitable representation. This is a point made clear in the recent reports by the guilds, which deal with both networks and studios.

The hearings came at a time of transition within the commission, as its conservative hegemony was about to come to an end. In addition, various sectors of the government had turned to the media as a "new" public policy issue, from the "information superhighway" to the impact of violence. Finally, the guilds released major reports in the period just before the hearings. In testimony before the commission, advocates and experts offered "access" as a solution to content and impact issues. In this view, minority employment within all levels of the industry — or, in sociological terms, structural assimilation — would lead to the desired changes in the types of series produced without a violation of the First Amendment.

To this suggestion, I added that no trainee programs be involved in the process, since these have not lead to increased employment, but rather perpetuate pay disparities, undermine the guilds, and give studios falsely inflated minority employment numbers, publicity, and tax benefits.

In response to the commissioners' line of questioning — which worked backwards from establishing a problem to fleshing out its emotional and social impact on individuals — I found myself questioning the commissioners themselves, asking if we really needed to prove that media had an impact on viewers, that minorities were underemployed in the industry, and that minorities were underrepresented in movies and entertainment television. In other words, did we really have to continue playing the numbers game, or could we move on to the practical steps that would solve these problems? Coming at the end of the panel, my questions were ones that the report will have to answer.

Looking back at the past twenty years, however, progress has been the product of protests, boycotts, and takeovers more often than government regulation and adjudication. As a consequence, progress has also been sporadic and piecemeal. Undoubtedly, this will not be the answer given by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in its report. More likely, the commission will identify many of the same problems that it did in 1979, and, as it did then, will call for additional, more accurate data with which to bolster its critique of the FCC and the regulatory process. It is difficult not to become cynical about the hearings and the eventual report, however noble the intentions of the commission. There is, after all, a problematic assumption behind the numbers game: namely, that the statistical substantiation of discrimination will reform the film and television industries once that information is brought to light.

In another context, Henri Lefebvre refers to this assumption as the "illusion of transparency" in which communication (of information, knowledge) alone acts to transform social space. The result is a belief in "freedom of expression" that pays no attention to the physical and institutional structures that limit access to social space.[27] What Lefebvre suggests, then, is that the numbers game is more a strategy of power than a search for knowledge. What these numbers ultimately "mean" will depend on the power relations within which they are asserted.

NOTES

1. These local concerns in Washington, D.C. — and the need for an investigation — were brought to national attention following civil disturbances in May 1991 that erupted after a rookie police officer shot a Salvadoran man during an arrest for public drinking. See U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racial and Ethnic Tensions in American Communities: Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination. Volume I: The Mount Pleasant Report*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1993).
2. I am paraphrasing Fletcher's rather frank comments during the hearings after I asked him to clarify the commission's own motivations and intentions for the hearings.
3. Despite pressure in the 1970s from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the courts, the FCC continued to deny hearings filed on behalf of women and racial minorities. For an overview, see U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1977), chapter 7. The three recommendations are taken from U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Window Dressing on the Set. An Update*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1979), pp. 62-64.
4. Jeffrey Chester and Kathryn Montgomery, Ph.D., "Media in Transition: Independents & the Future of Television," *National Video Resources Reports* no. 10 (November 1992).
5. *Variety*, December 10, 1990, p. 31
6. *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1992, p. F3.
7. According to the NAACP, racial minorities account for 35% of the movie going audience. *Variety*, September 10, 1990, p.5.
8. *Variety*, December 10, 1990, p. 31.
9. This appears to be confirmed by a recent report by the Screen Actors Guild, which found the rate of employment for Hispanics in television commercials (combined on- and off-air principals) to be about twice that of theatrical films (4%) and television (3%). Screen Actors Guild, "Employment in Entertainment: The Search For Diversity: A SAG Statistical Survey of Ethnicity, Age, and Gender in Film, Television, and Commercials," June 15, 1993,
10. *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1993. M4.
11. *Albuquerque Journal*, February 26, 1992, p. A3.
12. Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller, "Hispanic Americans," *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television: Historical Essays and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), pp. 243-259.
13. David Atkin. "An Analysis of Television Series with Minority Lead Characters,"

Critical Studies in Mass Communication 9 (1992): 337-349.

14. *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1993, p. P9; and Screen Actors Guild, "Employment in Entertainment," June 15, 1993.
15. Jesús Salvador Treviño, *Hispanic* (August 1992): 76.
6. "DGA Figures on Days Worked by Women and Minorities," News release, April 20, 1992, Directors Guild of America; *Variety*, April 21, 1992, pp. 1, 18; Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Looking Beyond the Statistics," *DGA News* (June-July 1992), pp. 13-14.
17. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1993 Hollywood Writers Report: A Survey of the Employment of Writers in the Film, Broadcast, and Cable Industries for the Period 1987-1991* (June 1993).
18. *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1993, p. F2.
19. Sally Steenland, *Unequal Picture: Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American Characters on Television* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women, August 1989), p. 37.
20. *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1992, p. P2.
21. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1989 Hollywood Writers' Report: Unequal Access, Unequal Pay* (April 1989), p. 19
22. William T. Bielby, and Denise D. Bielby, *The 1993 Hollywood Writers Report* (June 1993), p.32.
23. Frank L. and Renee Schick, eds. *Statistical Handbook on U.S. Hispanics* (Phoenix: Onyx Press, 1991).
24. As the Commission noted in its 1977 Findings, "The presentation of minorities and women in a representative and realistic manner has been impeded by an assumption that do to so would diminish televisions use as a medium whose programming is designed primarily to attract the largest possible audience." There is no response or refutation of this assumption in the findings. *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1977), p. 148.
25. *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1992, p. F1; and *Broadcasting*, March 9, 1992, p. 21.
26. "Rights Commission Sets Los Angeles Hearings," News release, May 26, 1993, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.
27. Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), pp. 27-29.

Made on Rails in Mexico

by John Mraz

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The most recent offspring from the mating of historiography and technological media, video history-like all later children-has been defined essentially in relation to its older siblings. Thus, in one of the few essays which has attempted to wrestle with some of the thorny issues raised by this emerging discipline, David Ellwood warned that video history "risks falling between two historiographical stools...oral history and film history." [1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Ellwood was perhaps the first to point out the necessity of specifying the parameters of video history, a task which daily grows more important. This article hopes to make some small contribution to that endeavor. However, I must admit that I am considerably less concerned with "historiographical risks" than in trying to determine what this form of discourse about the past and present offers to historians, and in asking how we might go about wrestling it from the monopoly maintained by both commercial and State television producers — with their mercenary and officialist ends.

I doubt that I will have to spend much time or energy to convince readers that the "TV history" which dominates television screens is much more interested in ideological control and technical perfection than it is in conveying a real sense of the past, particularly that of the working class and, above all, that of the working class in the "backyard" of the United States. Technical perfection is neither neutral nor cheap; it is very expensive, and the costs are not only in money. Through such perfection, historians are intimidated from producing their own video histories. Thus the field is left to those who know little of history, but are most informed as to how to obtain the enormous sums necessary to produce such "histories."

Obviously, the history they propagate serves the interests of the ruling elites who make that money available. Historians' reviews of the major networks' lavishly produced "TV histories" abound with criticisms of their anachronism, inaccuracies, and triviality — faults palpably evident in the most important Mexican example, the officialist *Biografía de poder* ("Biography of Power"), shown extensively during 1987. However, although I know that such cursing of the darkness has its uses, I would prefer to call upon historians to light their own candles and begin using this sensuous, convincing, and entertaining medium to communicate the knowledge and understanding they have developed through their years of studying and teaching this discipline.

VIDEO HISTORY AND ORAL HISTORY

Oral history now has enough of a tradition to have begun to define its disciplinary limits, and the use of videotape equipment in conducting interviews has apparently "engendered a great deal of controversy." [2] Evidently, much of this controversy has ranged around the manner in which the presence of videotape equipment "disrupts" the sensitive interpersonal context of an interview. While not wishing to minimize the effects of equipment presence, two observations of this criticism seem to be in order.

One: To assume such purity is to lose sight of the fact that every form of "rescuing" the past will have both limitations and advantages. Although video historians need to learn from the theoretical groundwork and methodological experiences of oral historians, the particular restraints imposed by recording and recounting the past with videotape will shape that historical discourse in specific ways. For example, it has been argued by some documentary filmmakers that the very presence of equipment and personnel necessary to film an interview can act as a "catalyst," what Jean Rouch described as a "psychoanalytic stimulant," that leads informants to take the situation more seriously and incites them to greater clarity and honesty — they become more, not less, of who they are. [3]

Two: The concern of oral historians with the phenomenological aspects of the interview situation may have limited their perspective of the ways interviews can be used to communicate about the past. It could be argued that they have tended to focus on the interview process, whereas the video historian is perhaps more concerned with editing those interviews into a history.

That is not to say, obviously, that video historians are unconcerned with the interview context. What goes on during the conducting of interviews is of great importance to the finished product, and I believe that "rapport" — that delicate, if difficult to describe, relation between interviewer and informant — is probably the primary mediation of video history's aesthetic. Poor rapport results not simply in a lack of information, it turns informants into wooden figures whose stiffness interferes with the audience's ability to learn from the history they are recounting. Oral historians commonly utilize their material in transcript form, a fact which saves them from the doubly-toilsome task which video historians have in fomenting the necessary rapport for interviews.

HECHOS SOBRE LOS RIELES

In a country such as Mexico, personal and family relations are indispensable in establishing rapport. During the making of *Hechos sobre los rieles: Una historia de los ferrocarrileros mexicanos*, the close personal relations which the interviewer, Gloria Tirado, had maintained with several key figures in the history of the railroad union — for example, Guillermo Treviño, Valentín Campa, Elías Terán, Juan B. Gutiérrez, and Miguel Aroche Parra — were as crucial in establishing rapport as were her family connections in the railroad town of Oriental. [4] These affinities were the key which allowed these individuals to open up in front of the camera: recounting anecdotes, telling jokes, openly criticizing the railroad union, and talking in great detail about the events which they have lived and know so well. These relationships also provided access to private photographic collections, as various informants allowed us to copy their photos and provided us with important information on these images, which were an integral visual element of the tape's aesthetic.

There was, as well, a political element in establishing rapport with the informants. With some exceptions, most of the national and local leaders interviewed were members of the Mexican Communist Party, a decision based on our desire to tell a very different story than is available in official histories, whether written or in the mass media. The fact that we came from the University of Puebla, an institution known for its leftist orientation, was important in allowing them to open up to us: they trusted us, and believed that the final tape would not betray that trust.

Here, it is useful to consider the texture offered by the variations between the interviews with those leaders and the rank-and-file workers we interviewed in the railroad town of Oriental. On the one hand, our intention was to develop a relation between the national history of the railroad workers and the micro-history of Oriental. On the other hand, it seemed to us important that the history we recounted was told not only through the mouths of the leaders, but from the perspective of the workers as well. One should not lose sight of the fact that several of those leaders came up through the rank-and-file, rising in the union through their militancy: for example, Campa and Treviño.

Nonetheless, there were significant differences between the perspective of the leaders and that of the Oriental workers. Perhaps the principle utility of the worker interviews was more that of revealing their "collective unconscious" rather than contributing to a specifically historical analysis. For example, although one of our intentions in the videotape was to demystify to some extent the exaggerated role assigned to Demetrio Vallejo in the strikes of 1958-59 (and the critiques leveled by Terán and Aroche Parra were of some use in this issue) the tendency of the workers to refer constantly to the "Vallejista Movement" reinforced the idea that those strikes were the work of one man. However, conscious of the importance of presenting what we might call a "popular historiography,"[5] and aware that an interview is a delicate relation, we chose not to contradict our informants and risk alienating them with questions that were not going to take us very far at any rate.

VIDEO HISTORY AND HISTORICAL FILMS

Such observations make us aware of the fact that video historians wear two hats. As oral historians, they have to be aware of the interview context, while as film historians they must focus on the medium as a communication tool. Nonetheless, I feel we should be careful not to be overly impressed with the apparent similarity of these two media. Film has much more visual resolution than video; in film, the image can "carry" the sound. With video, it is the opposite: sound is often of greater importance than the visual elements. It follows from this that video history is at least as closely allied with oral history as it is with film history, a position supported by the advantages which video offers when compared to film in conducting interviews. The great cost of doing interviews on film necessarily imposes limits. With video, interviewers can allow the interview to continue as long as they want, and they can conduct many more interviews.

Thus, it seems to me that, while film history will generally tend — and has in fact tended — toward the use of omniscient narration, it is the nature of video history to construct the historical narrative from interviews. Here, I would like to be as clear as possible about some of the implications of the differences between using omniscient narration and interviews (or participant narration). Although a

narrative forged exclusively from interviews — as in cinema verité (the very name itself points to the danger) — may appear to be more objective, it is not. In fact, the very credibility which the interviews lend to the videotape may tend to interfere with the critical perspective which every good work of history ought to awaken in its audience. A narrative constructed from interviews may make it difficult to get beyond or behind the vision of those being interviewed. Thus, it becomes the task of the video historian to create a context which will distinguish between memory and history (a problem we will return to below).

It is also important to draw attention to the structural limitations that one confronts in attempting to construct a history through interviews. The director of the BBC series "The World at War," Jerry Kuehl observed that there is a tendency among informants "to replace a candid, private version of events, with a sorter public version." [6] For Kuehl, while interviews can appear to be very intimate, those which go into historical documentaries often make for a very formal and very public kind of history that is a good deal more circumspect. We like to believe that the rapport that we were able to establish with our informants in making *Hechos* saved us, to a large degree, from the generalized self-censorship that preoccupies Kuehl. [7] However, there was surely more than one occasion on which the fact that our informants were appearing before a camera conditioned their responses.

Another constraint in this discipline comes from the sort of expectations that we have about what is a good screen presence; that is, the degree to which what we believe to be "good television" determines who we allow to tell the history. This issue of presence revolves around various considerations: For example, does the informant talk too fast or too slow? Do they speak clearly or are they difficult to understand. Is their's a popular or an academic language. Do you hear the "dental click" characteristic of many older informants? Do they move too much or do they appear to have no energy? Such questions make us aware of the fact that many times the people that appear on the screen to recount historical events are there, not because their interpretation is the best, but because their's is a TV presence to which we have become accustomed. Finally, we must not forget the all-too-familiar phenomenon of informants who tell wonderful stories — passionate and colorful and full of anecdotes that illuminate the past and bring it to life — until the moment when we turn on the lights to begin taping them. Then, the faces become pallid and the histories monosyllabic. Obviously, they have been terrorized by the equipment, and cannot appear in the tape. Nonetheless, if it is necessary to be conscious of these structural limitations, it is important to remember that these are among the limits that define the discipline of video history.

Further, if the use of interviews and a cinema verité narrative do not necessarily assure greater objectivity, they do allow viewers to see and hear actual participants, and they may provide more historical detail: for example, information about the informants' sex, age, race, and class (something that can be gleaned from their clothing, as well as from their forms of speech.) [8] Moreover, interviews can provide access to elements absent from written sources, such as body language and voice intonation, volume, and rhythm. These may tell us more about meaning than about facts. [9] For example, Miguel Aroche Parra provides a trenchant description of the significance attached to the greatest setback in the history of Mexican labor when he states,

"The railroaders' defeat in 1959 was a defeat for the labor movement, a defeat for the democratic movement, a defeat for the anti-imperialist movement, a defeat for the peace movement. That is the magnitude of the 1959 defeat."

Whether one agrees with Aroche Parra's hyperbole, it is indicative of the psychological impact of that event on its participants, something reinforced by the emotional charge evident in his vehement tone and passionate gestures.

Aroche Parra's use of significant pauses, the lowering and raising of his voice, and his kinetic body motion — one hand cutting knife-like into the other as he recounts how U.S. President Eisenhower ordered his Mexican counterpart, Lopez Mateos, to "strike against the labor movement" — are an articulate demonstration of the feelings still moved by those memories. His intonation and movements are also a revealing embodiment of an expressive style typical of Mexican labor militants. Hence his physical presence conveys an element at once important to understanding the history of the Mexican railroad workers and impossible to convey except through the medium of a video (or film) interview.

Yet another instance during the filming of *Hechos* where an informant's reaction provided an interesting insight into Mexican culture occurred during the interview with Guillermo Treviño. When I asked Treviño why the 1959 repression had been so brutal, I did so knowing that it he was going to be made uncomfortable by having to respond to me, a *gringo*, that it had been a result of Eisenhower's pressure on López Mateos. And, that is what happened: he said,

"Although I'd prefer not to have to say it, I think that the U.S. had a lot to do with what happened."

As a Mexican *caballero* of the old school, Treviño did not want to insult his "guest." But, as a tireless defender of social justice, he had to answer with what he thought was the truth. Here, the interview context served as a catalyst, provoking a behavior very typical of elder Mexican men.

Utilizing the interview as the narrative structure of a video history does not, however, assign to it a value such that the historian ought to fear "interrupting" the "flow of memory," as Ellwood noted some "extreme defenders" of oral history do. [10] In all forms of history, materials are selected by the historian in accordance with what he or she perceives as the truth to be conveyed. But, some oral historians have argued against the use of the "TV history" form in which "cutaways" to moving footage or photographs are usual. Here, the distinction between the "stereotypical" and the "particular" is of utmost importance. Producers of "TV history" are little concerned with communicating the particularity — i.e., the historical — of the specific event and period presented. They conduct a minimum of graphic research, and the result is the use of photos and moving footage time and again to illustrate some thesis, with little respect for the real context out of which these historical artifacts have been ripped.

STEREOTYPES AND PECULIARITY

This tendency to use images stereotypically not only undercuts the credibility and excitement they can bring to the work it flies in the face of these artifacts'

particularity. Although we are accustomed to seeing photos used as illustrations to represent generalities in TV productions and textbooks, they would be better used to present particularities. As opposed to words — conventional symbols that describe similarities — a photo can never be general. It always presents a specific moment, a particular fraction of a second. The forms of material existence and social relations which are revealed by photos — daily life, work, class, race, and gender relations — are never general. A photo can never represent, for example, "labor relations in the 1960s." A photo is not a synthesis, it is simply a slice of time in which this worker stood in front of this specific machine at this particular instant; a fraction of a second in which this group gathered in front of this factory to make these demands.

However, historical photographs suffer from a curious irony. If they are by nature necessarily particular, seen out of context, they become generalities. Without some way of reconstructing the specific situation presented in a photo, the riveter fabricating boxcars in the Nonoalco trainyard on the 8th of November, 1944, becomes railroad worker. (Figure 1) Stripped of their contextual specificity, photographs become metaphors or symbols, myth instead of history. We need to bring the same sort of seriousness and discipline that we use in researching written documents to the search for and identification of photographs and moving footage. [11]

The degree to which even historians who work extensively with film assume that images have been used in a general, abstract, and illustrative way can be demonstrated in the following anecdote. When *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles* was shown at the 1987 Congress of the American Historical Association, the prominent historian-cineaste, John O'Connor (founder and editor of *Film & History*) was surprised to discover that, with few possible exceptions, the photos utilized in the tape all corresponded to the historical period presented. He found the fact so remarkable that he stated some way ought to be found to inform the audience of this.

I would also like to argue for a greater use of photos in place of the traditional reliance on moving footage that we find in so much film history. This proposition is based on several observations. The first is a question: What information is available in moving footage that is not present in photos? Though recognizing that there are certain elements in documentary footage that are less accessible in photos — body language, for example — the reliance on footage fills up screen time at an alarming rate. This reduces the variety of images that could be used. It's a situation made worse by the fact that the limited amount of footage available necessitates its "stereotypical" utilization in different productions.

Second, as graphic history goes beyond mere "illustrationism" — moving from representation to presentation — photographs offer greater possibilities for bringing the audience into an interpretive tension with the work.[12] Instead of being led along by the nose through a constant alternation of the moving image, the audience has the opportunity to view the photos and to reflect on them as well as on the interpretation which is being offered. (Of course, the aesthetic demands of video and history may be at odds, and what could appear to a video maker as an appropriate time for an image to be on screen might seem to an historian completely inadequate. However, this is the sort of tension that will be resolved as

historians begin to develop their own language of video.)

Third, the working class has made many, many more images of itself in photographs than on film; these photos are fundamental in trying to tell as truthful a story about them as we can. Fourth, photos require a different sort of research than film, one which often brings historians into direct, continual contact with the people whose photos they are reproducing. As we copy and identify the photographs, we hear history told from the mouth of those who have lived and made it.

These considerations bring the triangulated relationship of the historian with the sources and the audience into focus. As is the case with the use of interviews, we understand and acknowledge our role as a prism between those who have lived history and those who are hearing and seeing it recounted. Finally, it is a good deal cheaper to copy photos than to reproduce film, a primary concern for historians who wish to use modern media.

RESEARCHING PHOTOGRAPHS

For the above-mentioned reasons, we made extensive use of photographs in *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles*; and some of the methodological issues raised during that project may be of interest. In the first place, it is crucial to point out that historians who labor in photographic archives engage in essentially the same tasks as historians who work with written sources: finding, preserving, and utilizing documents to talk about the past. In general, this is a different situation than that of historians who employ television and film footage, something that can be appreciated in considering Pierre Sorlin's intelligent comments on the historian's role in relation to such footage. He stated that,

"audiovisual material[s]. completely alter the situation. [H]istorians have no monopoly over the material, nor are they alone in studying and disseminating it. For example, television has made most of the interesting material relating to the Second World War widely available. In this respect, the historian's task is no longer to compile otherwise unknown sources and make them available to all: he must learn instead to use material that is already widely available." [13]

While Sorlin's argument in relation to television and film footage is essentially true (although we would want to consider the possible uses of home movie footage), this is decidedly not the case with photographs, and above all in a country such as Mexico. Extensive research is required in both public and private photo archives in order to unearth and identify images useful to the history which will be recounted. Further, the purchase and preservation of private archives by the Mexican government is often the direct result of historians' research and lobbying.

The degree of photographic research necessary to produce a video-history can be appreciated in considering the variety of archives consulted in making *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles*. Among the principle repositories of the photographs used in the videotape were major public archives composed largely from the collections of photojournalists. The source most important to the period from the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) to 1940 was the well-known archive of Agustín Víctor Casasola which is housed in the Fototeca of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología

e Historia.[14] However, while the Casasola collection provided us with some lovely and powerful images, the fact that the archive is rather loosely catalogued placed us in dilemma, above all given our position concerning the particularity of photographs. Of course, the photographs of the revolution were clearly recognizable. But, as we could not rely on the identifications of Casasola photos for the following periods, we were forced to utilize images from other sources for most of the succeeding "chapters."

Nonetheless, we faced a problem in the "chapter" on the Workers' Administration (1938-1940). We did have some photos from the private archive of Elias Terán, the first Director of the Administration; but we didn't have nearly enough to make the interview with Juan B. Gutiérrez visually palatable. Gutiérrez's statements were crucial to the tape and hitherto unknown to students of Mexican railroad history; but, his monotonal intonation and his refusal to look up at the camera or interviewer would have quickly alienated our audience. We found ourselves facing what we might call the "aesthetic imperative" of graphic history.

The way out of our dilemma was to locate photos in the Casasola archive that almost certainly had been taken in the late 1930s and which we felt expressed the energy and optimism of Workers' Administration experiment. One historian who has worked extensively with photographs, Michael Lesy, argued,

"If photographs are to be used as data by the humane social sciences, they must be understood as documents of a particular era and its particular state of mind." [15]

Our aesthetic requirements seemed to justify this recourse to what we might call a "psychological correspondence." However, we remain convinced of the necessity to struggle against the "easy way out" of "illustrationism" that has given visual history the bad reputation it has so often richly deserved. Photos must be contextualized, and we continue to be committed to making every effort to find images that correspond exactly to the period depicted. In the case of the Workers' Administration, however, we were compelled, in the words of J.H. Hexter, to "sacrifice exactness for evocative force." [16]

Fortunately, the other public photo archives we utilized did not present us with this problem. Though probably the largest collection of negatives by a photojournalist collective in Latin America, the Fondo Hermanos Mayo of the Archivo General de la Nación has a catalogue for many of its images, providing data about specific dates and places.[17] Thus, for example, a number of the photos we chose of the 1958 railroad strike are found in the "Chronological" section of the archive, in envelope #12609, on which is described the events occurring and the places where the images were taken on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th of July. The Archivo General de la Nación also provided photos for the "chapter" on the Adolfo de la Huerta rebellion; these were readily identifiable as they were found in the Fondo Presidente Plutarco Elías Calles and clearly corresponded to that event. Other public archives included the Hemeroteca Nacional (National Periodical Library), where the newspapers photographed contain exact dates, and the collection of the Mexican Railroad Union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana), whose photos are accompanied by typed descriptions of dates, places and people. Finally, the few images we utilized from the Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico (CONDUMEX) were easily identifiable as pertaining to the revolutionary

period, which is the focus of that archive.

Private photographic archives were as vital to the video history as were the public depositories. As noted above, Elías Terán's collection provided us with several images of the Workers' Administration, and of his campaign for Secretary General of the Railroad Union; our consultations with him made clear the contents of the images. However, the single most important private archive was that of Guillermo Treviño, for we were able to trace his career as a railroad worker and union militant through the extensive collection which began shortly after the revolution and continued up to 1987.[18] Further, the lengthy interviews we conducted with him provided us with much information, as well as a general orientation in Mexican railroad history. These photos and interviews were particularly significant because, as a resident of Puebla (a city two hours from Mexico City), Treviño afforded us a perspective from the provinces so often lacking in histories of Mexico.

Another effective counterbalance to the dominance of Mexico City in Mexican historiography was supplied by the images of Oriental. By conducting an almost door-to-door search, we were able to turn up images that were crucial for telling the town's political history — such as its founding in 1917 — as well as being socially revealing. For example, we used photos of young boys posed on the fronts of trains during one sequence where informants describe how every male family member works for the railroad. Further, the use of family photo albums in Oriental was a critical element in addressing the imbalance present in the dominant form of history, which focuses on great men and events. To observe that a "people's history" of Oriental could only have been told through such family images is to belabor the obvious.

The role of the photos in communicating historical knowledge is worth considering. Essentially, the photographs function to enrich, enliven, and personalize the history which the informants are recounting. For example, when Valentín Campa explains that the railroad workers joined de la Huerta's rebellion because "he protected them from attacks by CROM goons,[19] the main enemy of the labor movement," this statement is accompanied by an image of the CROM's despotic and ostentatiously corrupt leader, Luis Napoleón Morones, seated beneath the CROM banner and in front of a table laden with rich foods and expensive liquors, his double chin oozing over his white collar. (Figure 2)

Photos can also render less polemical testimony. The very title of the tape, *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles*, comes from Treviño's statement that the Mexican revolution was "made on the rails," something apparent in photos of families housed on top of troop trains. (Figure 3) Such images of the revolution also attest to the participation of women in that struggle, something generally more apparent in photos than in written accounts. We can see this same presence in one of the photos from Treviño's archive, where the banner of the Unión de Conductores, Maquinistas, Garroteros y Fogoneros is carried by his wife, Herminia, during the 1921 strike. Treviño's collection also provided evidence of the poor housing conditions of the railroad workers and their families. He himself took the images of the old railroad cars in which they lived, as well as of the woman washing clothes next to the track. (Figure 4) The demand for the level of housing promised by the 1917 Constitution was central to the 1958 strikes. And Valentín Campa makes clear in the tape that the expense this would have caused the multi-national corporations

was one of the main factors behind the repression unleashed against the workers. Treviño's archive contained eloquent testimonies of the price paid for attempting to create an independent Mexican labor movement, as in images of him and other strikers being marched off to jail under military guard in 1959. The Hermanos Mayo photos of the army occupation of the railroad stations are also cogent and graphic proof of the Mexican government's determination to control the labor movement. [20] As an alternative to such repression, we utilized images of the jubilation of the railroad workers when they won the short-lived right to elect their own representatives, (Figure 5) as well as photos from Terán's private archive where, during his candidacy for Secretary-General of the union, workers painted "Vote for Terán, He Won't Sell Us Out" on a water tower.

HISTORY AND THE PAST

It is useful here to remember that history and the past are not the same thing. The tendency to equate the past and its reconstruction is particularly problematic in an audio-visual discourse where the memories of informants easily become the equivalent of history, the headlines of newspapers can be taken to be what "really happened," and the visual images can be perceived as "reality." Conscious of this problem, and desirous of producing an educational videotape, we felt that the project's goal was not just to tell a history but to produce a critical response to that which we were recounting. We attempted to do that through certain self-reflexive tactics. For example, we incorporated comments by Elías Terán in which he refers specifically to the fact that he is participating in an historical reconstruction; he is also careful to qualify his perspective, "subjectifying" his remembrances. Through these comments, he distinguishes between "memory" and "history," two forms that are often conflated in cinema verité productions where the narrative is constructed largely through interviews.

A different strategy designed to produce a critical response to the videotape was that embodied in the use — and reflection on that use — of newspaper headlines. Each "chapter" of the videotape is introduced through headlines that serve to orient the audience about the events which they are going to witness and hear about. For example, the "chapter" entitled "The Strikes of 1958-1959" is preceded by headlines and texts from newspapers of that period that provide a basic framework for following the major events of those strikes. However, in spite of the usefulness of these headlines in quickly orienting the audience as to the history they were to witness, we did not want to give the impression that what appeared in the newspapers — or in the videotape — was truth incarnate. For that reason, towards the end of the videotape we utilized a statement by Valentín Campa where he asserted that the 1958-59 strikes were smashed

"principally by the great political confusion that was sown by all the news media in insisting that the movement was directed by the Soviet Embassy."

By juxtaposing this statement with headlines such as that decrying the "Railroaders' Plans for a 'Workers' Revolution,'" we hoped to draw attention to the subjectivity of one of the sources that we were employing to tell this history.

Now, while the strategies we employed with some of the interviews and the newspaper texts may have served a bit to remind the audience that history, to

paraphrase Korzybski, is a map of the past and not the past itself, we were not able to incorporate such distancing in our use of photographs. We feel that this is regrettable, because, as Eric Margolis has argued,

"Photographs tend to overpower our critical faculties and our ability to question the image before us." [21]

Thus, it is perhaps the creation of a disjuncture between words and images that offers the greatest possibility for "cracking the videotape apart at the seams" through internal contradiction, and stimulating a critical reaction to both the visual images as well as to the tape as a whole. [22] To a limited extent, we attempted to do this by juxtaposing photos of happy couples embracing in the Oriental train yard at the same time that an informant describes the complete lack of social life in that town. Of course, this juxtaposition also showed the plurality of perspectives on small town life, for the fact that those couples had such images taken provides insight into their feelings about the railroad — what they "were proud of, thought interesting, and what they wanted to show to others." [23] In general, however, we were not able to go much beyond "illustrationism." If the photographs do enrich the history, they still remain essentially picturizations of the events presented rather than function to incite the public to take on a critical stance and question both the images and the history which is being recounted.

A METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Having noted the utility of photographs, as well as our limitations in employing them, it is necessary to draw attention to problems created in the use of "cutaways" during interviews. In what we might call the "classical" form of TV interviews, ellipses were covered up with cutaways. It was felt that to cut within the interview was unaesthetic, because it resulted in the informant's head suddenly jerking from one position to another. This seems to have changed recently, and we now often see cuts within the interview visually presented by the "jerking head," or with "wipes." While I applaud television networks for this apparent move toward objectivity — though suspicious that it only functions to disarm the audience and make the noxious ideology they serve up more credible — we chose not to follow this trend, and decided to cover ellipses within the interviews with cutaways. This of course poses the question of whether every cutaway is an ellipsis. Though we are cognizant of the methodological problems this creates — and aware once again of the way that aesthetic demands shape video history — we were nonetheless willing to sacrifice the apparent objectivity of the "jerking head" for the power and grace that were available in as seamless a web as we could construct on a most limited budget, [24] where members of the Mexican working class recount their experiences.

VIDEO AND LABOR HISTORY

The implications of using videotape to record and recount working-class history are complex. On the one hand, it would seem to be the most appropriate medium for this discipline. It gives a voice and image to the "inarticulate" allowing for the incorporation of their photos — whether from private collections or as the work of photojournalists, who earn their daily bread by recording history in the making — and it facilitates the use of music related to that class. These arguments are particularly convincing when we discuss the working-class history of an underdeveloped country such as Mexico, where illiteracy is high and most workers

are far from being able to write of their experiences (although one notable exception in the tape is Valentín Campa).[25] However, video history is expensive; it requires training and experience which few workers have the time or money to receive so that they might develop their own forms of talking about their past in this medium. Nonetheless, experiments in revolutionary situations, such as Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, indicate that it may be easier for workers to learn basic videotape production skills than it would be for them to acquire the capacity to write their own history.[26] We may, then, be not so terribly far from that day when, as Eric Hobsbawm told us, "working people can make their own life and their own history." [27]

In sum, the battle is joined: videotape histories will be produced, whether historians do so or not. To some historians, certainly, it will seem a weak medium for conveying the complexities of history; but I would remind them that it is not a question of "translating" a written text into a visual discourse, but of exploring the new ways of talking about the past which this medium makes available. And, I would argue that there is a sensual expansion obtained through seeing and hearing actual participants talk of their experiences, through looking at photos and footage of events, and through listening to music from the period which provides a stimulation as much intellectual as emotive and aesthetic. We witness the living proof of history, a proof which — if it does not provide as many answers — pricks the mind to ask the questions.

NOTES

1. David W. Ellwood, "Archivo Nazionale Cinematografico Della Resistenza, Torino — Oral History and Film History: the Use and Misuse of Interviews," in *History and Film: Methodology, Research, Education*, edited by K.R.M. Short and Karsten Fledelius, (Copenhagen: International Association for Audiovisual Media in Historical Research and Education, 1980), 21-32.

2. Joel Gardner, "Oral History and Video in Theory and Practice," *Oral History Review* 12 (1984), 105.

3. See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 253-262; and the interview with Jean Reach in *Documentary Explorations*, edited by G. Roy Levin (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 137.

4. *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles: Una Historia De Los Ferrocarrileros Mexicanos* is the result of a collaboration between Gloria Tirado and John Mraz from 1984 to 1987. In 1988, it was subtitled in English as *Made On Rails: A History Of Mexican Railroad Workers*. In 1988, the videotape was given the "Award of Merit in Film" by the Latin American Studies Association and the Hubert B. Herring Award" as the "Best Videotape, Film, or Non-Print Media" by the Pacific Coast Council for Latin American Studies. It is distributed in the United States by The Cinema Guild (1697 Broadway, New York, NY, 10019) and, in Mexico, by the Centro de Información by Documentación de la Cultura Audio Visual (CIDCA V) of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

5. See Michael Frisch, "The Memory of History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, et al. (Philadelphia: Temple

University Press, 1986). 5-17.

6. Jerry Kuehl, "TV. History," *History Workshop* 1 (Spring, 1976), 129.

7. Ibid., p. 130.

8. See Lola G. Luna, "El video aplicado a la memoria de la mujeres latinoamericanas, *Boletín Americanista* 38 (Barcelona, 1988).

9. See Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12 (Autumn, 1981).

10. Ellwood, op. cit., p. 31.

11. I have argued this point in the following articles: "Más allá de la decoración: hacia una historia gráfica de las mujeres en Mexico," *Política y cultura* 1 (Fall 1992); "Imágenes ferrocarrilcras: una visión poblana," *Lecturas Históricas de Puebla* 59 (Puebla: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 1991); "Some Visual Notes Toward a Graphic History of the Mexican Working Class," *Journal of the West* 27:4 (October, 1988); "De la fotografía histórica: particularidad y nostalgia," *Nexos* 91 (July 1985).

12. See John Berger, "Another Way of Telling," *Journal of Social Reconstruction* 1:1 (January-March, 1980), 60.

3. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1980), 4.

14. The Casasola collection is composed of some 400,000 glass plate and plastic negatives. The best published introductions to this archive are: *The World of Agustín Victor Casasola, Mexico: 1900-1938* (Washington D.C.: Fondo del Sol Visual Arts and Media Center, 1984; and Flora Lara Klahr, *Jefes, héroes y caudillos: Archive Casasola* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986).

15. Michael Losy, "The Photography of History," *Afterimage* 2:8 (February, 1975), 3.

16. J.H. Hexter, "The Rhetoric of History," *Doing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 19.

17. The Fondo Hermanos Mayo contains some five million negatives. See John Mraz, "CloseUp: An Interview with the Hermanos Mayo, Spanish-Mexican Photojournalists (1930s-present)" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 11 (1992); and John Mraz, "Foto Hermanos Mayo: A Mexican Collective," *History of Photography* 17:1 (Spring, 1993).

18. On the use of family albums, see David Russell, "Any Old Albums? Building a people's history," *CameraWork* 16.

19. CROM are the initials of the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers), the first national union in that country.

20. An interesting experience illustrating the importance of the ideological control of images is that which occurred while I was mounting a photographic exposition on "The History of the Mexican Labor Movement" for the Centro de Estudios Históricos del Movimiento Obrero Mexicano (CEHSMO), a research center affiliated with the Secretaría de Trabajo (Department of Labor). I had only recently arrived to live in Mexico, and had selected several of the more powerful photos by the Hermanos Mayo of the army intervention in the 1959 strike. However, I was quickly informed that under no circumstances could images showing the military occupation of the railroads be included in the exhibit.

21. Eric Margolis, "Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of Historical Photos," *Radical History Review* 40 (Jan. 1988), 35.

22. I am here paraphrasing from the famous discussion of *Young Mr. Lincoln* that occurred in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinéma / Ideology/ Criticism," in *Movies and Methods* 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 27.

23. See Marie Czech, "At Home: reconstructing everyday life through photographs and artifacts," *Afterimage* 5:3 (Sept. 1977), 11.

24. Given the gratuitous access provided by the Puebla State TV station (IMEVISION-PUEBLA) for editing the final version, the cost of the videotape is difficult to calculate; the total amount spent was somewhere around \$2,000 to \$3,000 dollars. We were only able to rent recording equipment for two days and to tape a total of seven hours of interviews. Other very minimal expenditures include the price of the photos, the slide film on which to copy them, and the costs of musicalization.

25. See Campa's autobiography, *Mi testimonio: memorias de un comunista mexicana* (Mexico: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1978).

26. See Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón, "Nicaragua: cine obrero sandinista," *Cuadernos de comunicación alternativa* 1 (May, 1983); and the interview with him in *Cinema and Social Change: Conversations with Filmmakers*, ed. Julianne Burton, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

27. Eric Hobsbawm, "Labor History and Ideology," *Workers: Worlds of Labour* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 14.

PHOTO IDENTIFICATION

1. Railroad workers, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 8 November 1994. Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, No. 1679.

2. Luis Napoleón Morones at a CROM banquet (Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos), circa 1925. Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

3. Troops boarding trains on way to front. Mexico City, circa 1915. Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

4. Woman washing clothes next to the railroad tracks, Puebla, circa 1958. Photo

taken by Guillermo Treviño; Treviño archive.

5. Railroad workers celebrating the agreement with the government which will permit them to elect their own union leaders, Nonoalco, Mexico City, 25 February, 1959. Archivo General de la Nación Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, No. 13313.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word

JUMP CUT's first twenty years: some politics of editing

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Anniversaries are often times for looking back, and after 20 years of producing JUMP CUT, we want to reflect on some of the lessons we've learned. Or to be more precise, we want to consider some things that informed the project from the start but which over time have become increasingly important and obvious to us: ideas embodied in the practice of editing.

Some of us who began JUMP CUT had extensive experience in the Underground Press, the publication of offset tabloid periodicals in the 60s and 70s that ranged from analytical to irreverent. That medium's thrifty format, eclecticism, and deliberately positioning itself outside the mainstream still inform our style. When we published the first issue of JUMP CUT in 1974, it was then hard to get the left to take culture and media issues seriously. When political activists did write about media, they dismissed Hollywood as simply racist, sexist, and anti-working class.

Or if reviews in the left press did admire a "bad" film, the reviewer might write, "This film admirably portrays the corruption of..." Such a critic might admit that a mass audience loved Hollywood but said this film carried a nefarious ideology that only the critic (and perhaps a few like-minded political sophisticates) could recognize and decipher. Such a critical stance didn't get very far in explaining film and television's mass appeal. In fact all you could really conclude from these reviews was that the masses of people were easily duped.

We get many such submissions to JUMP CUT, and over the years we've certainly published many such reviews. But, recognizing the limits of this approach, we've also sought out more sophisticated analyses that can account for the appeal of mass culture, and we tried writing our own: for example, Chuck Kleinhans on *EVEL KNEIVEL* and *THE LAST AMERICAN HERO* (JC 2); John Hess on *THE GODFATHER II* (JC 7), Julia Lesage on Griffith's *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (JC 26).

The second context in which JUMP CUT was founded and in which it has flourished is the rise of film and television studies as an academic discipline. In 1974 we saw this new academic discipline emerging and we wanted to shape its agenda. In that sense, we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. When we began,

the dominant academic models for any kind of ideological criticism of Hollywood were heavily indebted to tracing stereotypes and using mass communications research content-analysis models. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School's influential, sophisticated, denunciatory analysis seemed to deny any valid pleasure in or progressive role for mass culture. Having grown up with radio, records, movies, TV, and rock n roll, we found it was hard to dance to nothing but Schoenberg. We were children of Marx and Coca Cola, as Godard once put it, survivors of the New Left and the 60s counter-culture. We eagerly threw ourselves into building the cultural dimensions of political struggle and the political dimensions of cultural struggle, and we have both drawn our strength from and hopefully contributed to the revived feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movements, the civil rights movement, and antiwar and anti-imperialist movements in these decades.

We have always assumed that genuinely radical critiques of the existing state of things — in this case, media culture — usually come from disempowered groups, from the margins, from those people trying to change the way things are. Our location within activism enhances our intellectual acuity. The enhanced perception of what is wrong with the status quo, generated from the margins, always involves two different but interconnected activities. One always involves a critique of the dominant, the well established, be that the unique high-culture art-world work or commercial culture's formulaic productions. The other activity involves building alternative institutions and constructing alternative practices, creating something new from the deconstruction of the dominant. We realize that a politicized cultural activism means working in both these areas, but we know that these two approaches are frequently insufficient in themselves. That is, critique alone is not enough, for it may well be framed within limits. Many activists or left and feminist intellectuals will raise legitimate questions about the popular and the commercial. But they also shield their own desire for another set of bourgeois norms, those embedded in the European art film, a form which escapes criticism for its handling of class, race and gender. Or a radical writer may develop one particular aspect of his/her analysis but not others: for example, addressing gender but not class, or race but not gender. Too often such analysis develops out of a critic's own position which s/he leaves unexamined.

Often U.S. activists try to totally reject the dominant without recognizing the way that a radical departure from bourgeois norms may involve dissent but does not automatically lead to a politically effective practice. In lifestyle this has sometimes produced a celebration of downward mobility, in media work a rejection of possible allies who work within established institutions, and in aesthetics an embracing of radical form for its own sake.

To actually reconsider one's own position critically is not that easy. To see beyond the comfortable horizon of the present moment and present social place in thinking about culture takes an effort. But sometimes we've found writings that gave us a new insight, such as Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" (in her book of that title), which considers the perishable yet annually renewed art form of African American women's gardens as a way of getting us to think about art and culture where it might be overlooked. Or we've found a model in Lucy Lippard's essay on women's hobby arts and crafts and in "The Pink Glass Swan" (collected in her *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*), which sympathetically considers working class women's taste and activities in art

and interior decoration.

We've also been challenged and inspired by looking beyond European and North American culture and learning about Latin American, African, and Asian cinema. Our study trips to Cuba and Nicaragua and our interactions with media workers there have been an important part of this learning process. In editing special sections on Cuban cinema, Brazilian cinema, Third World film, African and African diaspora cinema, we've been enriched with new viewing experiences and challenged to rethink some basic ideas about what film and video is and can do.

This returns us to the need for a practical politics, one based on the ability to intervene in situations, to address actual individual and social needs. In this perspective, one of the most encouraging things that has happened in the past twenty years is that, gradually and irregularly, an infrastructure for alternatives has been put in place. It's as if the children of the 60s counterculture managed to grow up, and a significant number have kept their utopian vision of alternative practices while creating the longterm basis for continuing challenge to the status quo. The success in many areas of local cable programming has provided more room for alternative views on television, though there has been a very limited success of initiatives to gain more space for dissent on public broadcasting. But the creation and growth of institutions such as Paper Tiger television and Deep Dish television have created more opportunities for more voices to be heard. And, in a limited way, but still significantly, the need for product in an expanding cable and dish market has left room for some progressive programming such as John Alpert's exposé documentaries on HBO. Similarly, the development of media art centers has helped decentralize media production and maintain a presence for exhibition. Specifically, JUMP CUT's own history has been shaped by the fact that the majority of our editorial board, in addition to writing about film and television, either independently make film and video or have built and sustained alternative venues for media exhibition and distribution.

In a similar vein, the ongoing success of constituency-oriented film and video festivals has provided an encouraging context for our work. For example, 1974, the year we started JUMP CUT, saw Chicago's first women's film festival. Today the city has an ongoing successful Women in the Director's Chair festival and events through the year, a major Latino festival, Blacklight — an African and African American festival, a long standing Gay and Lesbian festival, and shorter themed programs for Asian American, Native American, senior citizen, and international children's festivals. Other institutions, such as the School of the Art Institute's Film Center, Chicago Filmmakers (just getting started when JUMP CUT began), the Video Data Bank, and Facets Multimedia, have provided the infrastructure of diffusion — film/video exhibition and the distribution of tapes — that is essential for sustaining media making.

Similar developments can be noted in other places, and college campuses have become significant sites for alternative exhibitions and productions. The areas of criticism, scholarship, and teaching have also changed over time. Film studies with a radical bent have developed into critical television studies and formed much of the basis for the field of cultural studies. While professional academic associations are typically bedrocks of conservatism, the Society for Cinema Studies has for some years now highlighted feminist and multicultural analyses. And academic

conferences such as Console-ing Passions (on TV and video), and Visible Evidence (on documentary) have significant panels on queer media, new African American and Latino video, and grassroots media activism.

While we have to acknowledge the casualties in the "culture wars" of the Reagan-Bush years, on balance we have also witnessed a notable, broad-based resistance to art censorship and a narrowly construed version of intellectual inquiry. Certainly the tide in this round of the culture wars, that of a "political correctness" debate, has turned, and many conservative figures such as William Bennett seem to be just flapping their wings rather than soaring with the eagles. In the long view, the reactionary challenge from the religious and secular right is growing more formidable. Yet in the last several decades, progressive activists have created media and political organizations to meet this challenge head on. As "radical" becomes a word appended to the radical right and as that sector of society perceives itself as an oppressed minority with its vision for social change, we are compelled to find ways to re-present and recast our own radical vision and that of the movements which informed us when we began JUMP CUT as a project.

Although many of us on the editorial board are independent media producers, JUMP CUT has had an awkward relation to independent producers while trying to support this sector of the media world. In forming JUMP CUT we saw the need to maintain a critical stance to both the dominant system of media production and to the actual alternatives. That has caused a pragmatic difficulty. If you want alternatives to succeed, you want to bring them forward, promote them to some extent, and give them the spotlight of attention. At the same time, independent producers, starved for publicity, recognition, and critical praise, look to radical writers on media for support. But we have been committed to the principle that uncritical support, in the long run, undermines the goal of building not just individual careers but institutional developments within a broad activist movement that can support and sustain individuals. While the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979 (JC 21, 22) never lived up to its organizers' and participants' highest hopes, in retrospect the proliferation of identity politics caucuses within the conference in many ways turned out to be a forecast of the need for coalition politics in the 1980s. What was then seen by some as a destructive fragmentation turned out to be the emergence of "separate-interest" causes which actually represent vital directions in alternative media today.

Sometimes "mainstreaming works," that is moving from the margins to the center not by challenging the existing power but by being absorbed or assimilated into the dominant. Sometimes the door is ajar and some people can move in, catching a trend. But it doesn't work for everybody (certainly not for everyone who'd like to mainstream) and the mainstream can't absorb all the dissent without overflowing its banks. Alternative institutions provide the space for something different, something better, something oppositional, something aimed at trying to transform, revolutionize, the existing order. It seems a particularly American trait to create alternative spaces, to seek independence and a chance to do-it-yourself and live the utopian desire. In its own small way JUMP CUT is an expression of that. For its editors it has provided access into intellectual life when unemployed or under-employed in academic pursuits. It has been a form of radical political work that could be sustained over time. And it has kept us alert and tuned in to new developments, new possibilities, new films and tapes, and through our writers and

readers new people with new ideas. Over these twenty years we have been challenged by our writers and readers to rethink and develop our own views of film, video, the media, our culture, and the world we live in. We look forward to continuing this exciting process of growth and change with you.

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